

Leveling up 341

Chapter 341: The Dryad Scrolls

The best way to describe crackling infested lands, Dallion felt, was as if a volcano had erupted, covering everything with ash. Unlike the coast, there were no cities, or green patches, nothing but wilderness and dust, and on occasion thickets of rust trees. As surprising as it was, insects and animals still managed to exist adapting to the harsh environment. However, even they were easy to fall prey to the swarms of cracklings and rustlings. On several occasions Dallion watched how a bird would fly by only to suddenly get devoured by a swarm of insectoid cracklings that emerged from the ground only to disappear soon after. Interestingly enough, this suggested that the situation wasn't that bad. As Nil had said, all the damages were on the surface the cracklings were still very much bestial and didn't have the strength to form cities or even villages. With a little effort, a sanitation crew could clean the entire area in a matter of days, the same as Dallion had witnessed during the mansion job. However, that wasn't what concerned him.

There's another forest up ahead. A crackling sparrow flew up to Dallion from the distance. We'll have to go around it.

Thanks, Gleam. Dallion nodded. The shardfly had done a good job of masking him and herself so as not to be detected. Anything else?

Yeah. The city is just beyond that.

A city next to a rust patch. Not the best location, but the fourth guardian had warned Dallion about that. When the realm was at its height, the city of Ashthorn had been one of the jewels of the world, rivaling the hilt capital itself. After the ruin of the realm, it had turned into a shell of its former self, though instead of being destroyed by cracklings it was infested by rust plants.

I see. So better starve now than starve later?

Dallion grumbled. Food was one of those things he tended to ignore in the awakened realms. It was purely due to the guardians insistence that he had taken any in this case, a bag of berries. Now that he had it, he planned to make them last for as long as possible, which went against Nils advice. For some reason, the echo kept insisting that Dallion eat as much as soon as possible.

The branches of the rust trees trembled as Dallion walked past. While Gleam had used her illusion powder to make him appear as a crackling, the plants still didn't appreciate him being close. In this realm, both rust and cracks fought for resources, making them at best reluctant allies.

Was there lots of rust during your time? Dallion asked, his shardfly familiar.

There's always been rust, Gleam replied. And there always will be. Most of the time it's harmless. Except at mountain cliffs.

Doesn't look harmless to me.

Trust me, its harmless. Even when its territorial, it doesnt attack unless provoked. Just be careful when youre near water.

It took half a day to get round the forest of rust. On several occasions Dallion was tempted to just go right through. However, each time he took even a step in that direction, the branches of the trees transformed into rustpines. They didnt attack as Gleam had said, they were creatures that only reacted when provoked but they made it clear that moving any closer was a bad idea.

At sunset, the city walls came into sight. They were very different from any Dallion had seen so far. For one thing, they were made completely of wood; not logs, not blocks, not even planks, but the entire wall was one monolithic structure made of wood. No known form of construction here or back on Earth was capable of achieving this. Either it was magic or the method had been lost to the ages. Considering this was a city of dryads, probably both held true.

Youre talking about a Moon cleric?

Clerics could, but also the naturally gifted. Still, couldnt have been a lot of people in this place. As Duzhd said, other than the guardians, there werent a lot of awakened in this place. Whoever it was must have been important.

The question was whether the architect had erected the walls before the inhabitants of the world had been banished, or after.

Judging by its size, the city of Ashthorn had a population of millions. At present, it held less than a hundred. Thanks to Dallions music skill, he was able to see several clusters of fear grow within the city. Each time he tried to get close, however, the beings would quickly run off, disappearing within buildings or in the sewers beneath the city. It was like trying to catch a newspaper taken by the wind.

As night came, Dallion chose one of the higher buildings to spend the night. In the past, he would have relied on the markers and his guard skills to wake him up at any threat. As things stood, though, he could rely on his familiars. It was also a huge plus that Lux could take the role of a blanket, keeping Dallion warm. Nox and Gleam were also in the room, standing guard. Neither seemed particularly bothered, least of all Nox, who spent the night curled up on the ground, semi-snoozing as well.

When the first lights of dawn crept into the room, the crackling stretched, yawned, then made his way to Dallion and poked him in the face. After several seconds of that, Dallion finally cracked an eye open.

Finally up? the shardfly asked. It wasnt clear who she was referring to exactly.

In response, Dallion stretched and yawned.

Well, at least I see where Nox got his sleeping habits. The shardfly fluttered by. No one came near during the night, just to let you know. I guess theyre afraid of you. or cracklings. Or both.

I guess this place doesnt see many visitors, Dallion said.

Actually, it gets nothing but visitors. Everyone who comes here is just passing through. They like to spend the night in safety, just like you.

Some safety. While there werent any cracklings, there was rust to spare. Having to resort to this abandoned place wasnt as bad as being out there, but it wasnt much better.

After a certain degree of nagging from Nil, Dallion ate a handful of berries, then set on exploring the city. Normally, hed go through the tall buildings to get a better view of everything. In this case, he decided to check out the places where the other inhabitants had been. It didnt take long for him to find what passed as the temp shelter. It was one of the wooden buildings. An entire area of the floor was covered with hay, making what could pass as a rough mattress. Marks in the corners indicated places where weapons must have been placed. More important, though, Dallions new perception level helped him see the traces on the pavement outside the building.

Minotaurs, he noted, sliding a finger over the cold surface.

Sort of. I didnt see any horns, Gleam replied.

Minotaurs without horns. That suggested that they either were a different species, or rather that they were still young. If they were anything like the ones on the other side of the sea, the minotaurs were probably nomadic in nature which meant that if anything of value had already been taken. Just to be sure, Dallion had his familiars go over the building in search of hidden spaces, but none were to be found.

Following that, Dallion focused back on the city. The state of the buildings created a deep sense of unease. They were in such a perfect condition that one would expect people to emerge from them at any moment now. However, no people did. The only noise was the sound of the wind passing through the streets.

Gleam, know what that says? Dallion asked, standing in front of a three-story stone structure. The wooden sign above the door was very similar to the ones in Nerosal, only written in a language that Dallion couldnt make out.

Not a clue.

Shield?

I thought the guardian said that no one entered the realm.

People always enter. But even if they didnt, there were local races. Youve already seen one. Maybe there are more? If so, this is the type of building theyd use: exotic dryad name, standard gorgon architecture.

Elegant, simplistic, and relying on stone. The gorgons introduced that type of architecture. In any event, Id say this is an inn or tavern. More likely an inn. Taverns are fancier on the inside.

No, but theres one place Id like to go.

Oh?

Does this place have a library?

There should be a building or two, but not sure youd be able to call it a library. I dont think any books would have survived this long.

As it turned out, the shield was half right. The building was the size of a small palace, as he had suggested. Spanning over an entire block, it had three major entrances, and more rooms than days in the year. There were no books or scrolls, of course, even the shelves that had been stored on were missing. However, there was one thing the looters of centuries past couldnt take: the entrance to a hidden realm. Finding it wasnt easy. Dallion himself had only noticed by accident while going from room to room.

The entrance itself was little more than a crack hidden among the patterns of the wooden texture. It didnt take much for Nox to claw the entrance open, revealing a whole new section of the library. The major difference was that this one was filled with rows of shelves, each of which contained dozens of wooden cylinders.

Slightly overcautious, Dallion spent a good while walking through the new area, expecting to trigger the appearance of a protector. There didnt seem to be any. Likewise, there didnt seem to be any obvious treasure either, or anything made of matter for that matter.

Hardly. Its volume eight-hundred and two.

You dont. Its a dryad scroll. You need to be a dryad to get it to morph to its legible form. As it is now, I can only read the title.

So, youre saying you need to be here in order to read it?

Pretty much, yes. Unless you have hidden skills Im not aware of.

What if I send the scroll to you?

It doesnt work that way. I need the physical scroll, not a metal copy.

I wasnt talking about a copy. What if I send you all the scrolls here?

In theory, thats a great idea. Itll give me something to do, not to mention Gen will be pleased youve come up with a use for another room in your realm. Now sure how youll pull it off, though.

I dont need to pull it off. Vermillion does.

The moment he said that, the wooden cylinder vanished from Dallions hand, appearing within his realm. Up to now he had only suspected that the ring could have such powers, but now he knew for sure; moving small items between realms was not only possible, but easy. And if Dallion could acquire one dryad scroll, there was nothing preventing him from acquiring them all.

Chapter 342: Birch Scroll

While sending an item from one realm to another felt exciting the first time, it lost its appeal after a few hundred goes. By the time the one thousand mark was passed, it had become a dreary experience.

The same way theres supposed to be something useful in the limiting echos scribbles? I didnt even know you back when it influenced your behavior and yet you still keep that trash. Not to mention that you havent read it once. Gen has and even he agrees that you should trash it.

Any mention where the other two cities are?

Birchgate is at the hilt of the world, and Oakpoint is near the mountain of the third temple.

Anything else?

That could have gone better, but at least there was no time constraint. It wasnt like Dallion would need the information before the end of the festival. With the scrolls in his domain, the armadil shield had all the time in the world which corresponded to a few weeks in the real world.

Taking the opportunity, Dallion returned to exploring the hidden realm. The collector in him didnt calm down until he had gathered every scroll there was. After all, he could always return them if they ended up not being useful, or place them in some other realm altogether.

After a few hours, even Nil made a snarky comment regarding Dallions habit of hoarding. That didnt stop Dallion, though it made him feel bad each time he discovered a new section. Among his new hoard, there was a considerable number of poetry and gardening scrolls all written by prominent rulers of the realm, according to the dryad. Unfortunately, there werent any scrolls of practical knowledge. With magic replacing math and engineering, it was no wonder that there were no materials on those subjects, although Dallion would have appreciated a few fighting techniques. Clearly, that wasnt the point of the library. Whoever had created it was simply a fan of history, literature, and culture.

Making a final sweep, Dallion was just about to leave, when his shardfly familiar suddenly fluttered to a section of the wall.

Whats up? Dallion asked. Out of habit, he combined his music and forging skills, but couldnt see anything special, just a solid wall of wood.

Theres an illusion, the shardfly said, sounding only semi-convinced. A good one.

You sure? Dallion stepped there and placed his hand on the wall. The sensation was very real. Feels pretty solid.

Thats why I said its a good one. When I was in the wilderness, I knew creatures who could do something like that. It feels real, but it isnt. The only way to break it is to shatter the illusions barrier.

So, youre telling me if I break the wall, itll break?

Hey!

Dallion could mentally imagine her crossing her arms. Said out loud, it made little sense, but so far he had seen many things that didnt make any sense. Besides, in all hidden realms hed been there was a prize, and although he didnt know the value of the dryad scrolls hed taken, he suspected there was more.

Nox, Dallion said. Care to do the honors?

You can do that?

You can do a lot of things with music that you dont know about.

Quite the reassuring thought. If only Dallions level was a bit higher, maybe hed even find out what she meant. If he was still favored by the Moon he might have even now.

Dallion summoned the harpsisword and played a chord. For a moment it seemed that a connection was established between the weapon and the wooden wall. Before he could repeat the process, though, the thread between them snapped.

That was unusual. Dallion tried the process a few more times, to no success.

As she spoke, the wall slowly changed appearance. A mesh composed of minuscule threads became visible. Now that Dallion knew what he was supposed to be looking at, he was finally able to see it. A new set of markers appeared, moving along the strings of the harpsisword like shifting dials. Matching them was going to be considerably more difficult than anything that Dallion had attempted, and so he got right to it. The melody was more like a string solo than a chord. Regardless, Dallion matched the markers best he could. It took him a few tries to get the hang of it. When he did, a blue thread emerged from the tip of the harpsisword, weaving its way into the wall. Then came the hard part moving the thread further in. Every combination of strings was like a command directing the thread to move up or down, left or right, front or back. Every turn, every motion had to be measured perfectly or the mesh would tear. Using instances Dallion had seen the consequences.

Second after second, the thread kept on moving further in, forcing Dallion to move closer to the wall so as to see what was going on.

Dallion winced, trying to see where the knot was. Focusing whatever willpower he had, he split into four instances as he tried to tackle the problem. When that failed, Dallion split into four new instances and tried again; and this time, he succeeded. The knot gone, the mesh dissolved like a knitted scarf after an encounter with a kitten. Part of the wall morphed into yet another scroll, this one birch white.

Relief and exhaustion mixed together as Dallion sat on the ground. Even twenty-three mind wasn't enough to the pressure, although the pain wasn't nearly as bad as Dallion feared it would be.

Nice trick, Gleam said. I need to spend more time with Harp. She knows her stuff.

I'll be sure to let her know, Dallion said, then slowly stood up. The headache was gone, although he still felt a bit shaky. Nothing that some rest wouldn't fix. Before that, it was time to see what he had spent so much effort on.

Anything you're familiar with?

Must be something local. Never heard anything called that.

COMBAT INITIATED

SCROLL PROTECTOR - VJARA

Species: BIRCH DRYAD

Class: SHADOW

Stats: 80% HP

Skills:

-Entangle

-???

-Attack

-Guard

-???

-Acrobatics

-Athletics

Weak Spots: ???

Before Dallion could respond, the birch dryad charged at him. As far as he could see, she didnt have any weapons. One moment later and that statement was no longer true.

MEDIUM WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 10%

Dallion didnt even see what hit him. The only thing he knew was that he received damage despite having split into instances. His opponent was in a league of her own, bypassing his defenses as if they were paper.

Thats not yours, the protector said.

The air in front of her blurred.

Dallions instinct of self-preservation must have been stronger than his conscious self, since before he could realize what had happened, a birch sword stopped inches from his face. The only reason it stopped there was because it was blocked by a blade of water.

The nymph guardian of the harpsisword had made an appearance again, as hadto Dallions surprisethe armadil shield. Both guardians filled the gap between the protector and Dallion, each with weapons at the ready.

This was the difference in skilllarge but not unsurmountable. Dallion knew enough to know he couldnt take them on just yet, but at the same time, he felt that day not to be too far off. With his familiars and high-level equipment, he could probably present a challenge after half a dozen levels or even less. Most important of all, Dallion now realized what had eluded him for so long: fighting came in many forms, not all of them physical.

Theyre all dead, Dallion said.

This gave the protector pause. Seeing that she couldnt break through Dallions defense of guardians, she leaps back, the weapons once again disappearing from her hands.

The realm has been barren for millennia. Only the guardians are left, and even they are losing to the crackings.

You're not supposed to be here, the protector noted. Calmness emanated from her very being, calmness and a deep sadness of fate.

Probably not, but neither is anyone else. I'm the first of the seven major races that has set foot here for thousands of years. The entire dryad race has been banished. There's no one to come for what you guard.

There was no music added to Dallion's words, just the conviction of truth.

He has empathy, the protector said.

He has, the armadil shield said in unusually formal fashion. But he cannot use it.

Is that why you've come, human? To learn?

Dallion wanted to say yes, that he wanted to learn as much as possible about this place, the Moons, and so much more. Instead, the words that came out of his lips were I don't know.

Then you'll have to find out, the protector said. And return here when you do.

You have left the Realm of the Aura Sword

Chapter 343: The Morning Before

Returning to the real world was sudden. Dallion didn't have a moment's time to prepare. From his point of view, it felt more as if he'd entered another realm rather than coming out of it. After going through such an experience, one could truly appreciate the story of the monk who, after having a dream of being a butterfly, could no longer be sure he wasn't a butterfly dreaming of being a monk.

Wheels started turning in Dallion's mind as he slowly remembered where he actually was. It had been a few seconds since he had run up the staircase, leaving Vend and Spike to deal with some problem outside. Officially, Dallion was supposed to have come here to practice his whip blade attacks.

You really have to work on that area. The more you keep your opponents guessing the better and you can't keep them guessing if you're as noisy as a swarm of shardflies.

For half a minute, Dallion leaned against the staircase railing, waiting. Dozens of scenarios went through his mind. What would Vend do when he returned? Would he suspect anything? Could Dallion remember the conversation they were having? That remained the greatest problem with spending long periods in the awakened realms. Even when Dallion tried, there would be small details he missed or even important ones. When Dallion had initially gone to the guildhall, he was wrecked. Now, he couldn't even remember the exact reason he was upset with Eury. He still missed her, but he had come to accept the almost certain breakup. In a few hours, the whole thing would likely be put to rest.

Loud arguments escalated to shouts. Apparently, a group of drunk tourists were set on entering the Icepicker guildhall, thinking it was a tavern. Considering how drunk they sounded, explaining that they were mistaken was bound to fail under the best circumstances. Having Spike attempt it was a recipe for disaster. Part of Dallion suspected that he would only escalate the situation to legally start a fight. Thankfully, soon enough, things started to calm down. Dallion was able to distinctly hear the city guard being mentioned on a few occasions. Another minute later, the door opened again and the two Icepicker elites went back in. Taking the initiative, Dallion went back down.

What happened? he asked.

The usual things, Spike replied. Dallion could feel the disappointment emanating from him. Some drunks wanted to go in for a drink. Thats what we get for buying a tavern for our guildhall.

This was a tavern? Dallion blinked.

Dallion wouldnt have imagined that, but it explained the feasting area in the garden outside, as well as why the Flameforge guild looked so much more corporate.

Supposedly, Vend replied in an annoyed voice. Was before my time.

Any chance theres some food hidden about? Dallion asked. I could use some after training.

Both the elites looked at him, after which Spike laughed.

Come along then, lets get you some food.

The food turned out to be the equivalent of an order. Apparently, Spike, of all people, had echo rings in several pubs and taverns. For the most part, they served as an early warning system to get the staff and patrons to prepare for a potential ruckus. However, the elite had also gotten into the habit of using them to request food be sent to wherever he was. With the festival in full swing, a large number of taverns were open twenty-four-seven, so it was no issue to get them to make a delivery.

Ten minutes later, Dallion, Spike, and Vent were sitting in the designated guard room, enjoying a spread of seafood.

Thats one thing about the festival, Spike said, mouth half full. They always ship in food from the entire empire.

Considering the price tag, there was no other way to put it. For many businesses, the festival was the same as Black Friday back on Earth.

So, are you ready for your next fight? Spike asked.

Pretty much. Im still trying to get the hang of this. Dallion tapped the hilt of his whip blade.

A whip blade, eh? Give it here for a moment. He reached out for it. Since he had agreed to pay for the food, Dallion felt he couldnt refuse.

The elite stood up, then waved the blade about. On several occasions, Dallion saw him split into instances and attempt some rather unsafe swings. In one of those, some serious damage was done to the room, though not to any of the people inside, thankfully.

Nice weapon, Spike said, looking at it closely. You cant even tell where the seams are.

Dont get too attached to it, Vend said. Where did you get it? He turned to Dallion.

I made an arrangement. If I manage to level it up, I get to keep it for my fights in the tournament.

A lot of trouble for a simple loan.

Give the kid a break. Spike made a few more swings, then handed the whip blade to Dallion, hilt first. The weapon is worth it. Maybe it'll get it to the next round.

Doubtful, Dallion said with an icy cold expression. But not impossible. Who will you be fighting next?

They haven't told me yet. Probably someone from the big five.

Spike? Vent asked.

The other nodded, then took a small pouch from his belt and opened it. There were over two dozen coins inside. However, by the way the man was handling them, Dallion could tell they were more than coins. If he had his kaleiderzisto handy, no doubt he'd see an echo in each.

Elvira, Spike said after a few moments. Not the best matchup, though, could have been a lot worse.

Do you know her?

Yeah, I have a bit of history with her.

Instinctively, Dallion leaned forward, curious to hear more. No sooner had he done so, than Vend grabbed Dallion by the shoulder and pushed him back into the chair.

She tends to drink and break things a lot, Vend said. Which makes her move in the same circles as Spike. That was before she became a caravan bodyguard and had to sober up. Merchants don't usually like bodyguards doing more damage than the things they are hired to protect against.

Yeah, yeah. Spike waved a hand. That was a sad day for all of us. The thing about her is that she fights with chains. That makes her more dangerous with each next round. Bottom line is, she'll go for you the instant the fight starts. Split into as many instances as you can and head right for her. Your biggest chance is to beat her in close combat. It'll be tough, but you don't have a prayer at long range combat.

Chains were quite the exotic weapon. Dallion had considered learning to use them at some point, mostly because of what he had seen in comics and movies. He hadn't expected he'd end up facing someone with such skills.

What skills does she have? Dallion asked.

Look at you. Spike asked. Asking the right questions. Can it be that our little Dal has fully grown up?

Hardly, Vend replied, ruining the moment. It remained unclear why he remained so displeased with Dallion, though lately there was a lot of that going on.

She's got the basic four, so no surprises there, Spike continued. The one you really have to look out for is carving.

Upon hearing that, a quick flashback went through Dallion's mind. The only person he had seen use carving in battle was a mirror pool leader. Back when Dallion had gone to reclaim the weapons stolen from him by Cloud, the tavern owner at Grey Harbor had made quite the display. It was

definitely enough for Dallion to feel uneasy. He had music and his forging skills, but those weren't as useful in direct combat.

Chains and carving? Dallion asked.

She's a mercenary, she'll have daggers. If you remain too close, she'll switch to those.

So, staying too far is a problem and getting too close is a problem.

Other than that, you're pretty much fine. Spike laughed. Oh, and don't let your guard down. She's a mercenary, so she'll play dirty.

During this whole time, Vend didn't bother giving a single piece of advice. Instead, he just sat there, calmly eating his food, and gauging Dallion's reaction.

You think the information's wrong?

On the contrary, I fear it might be spot on. How he obtained it is of far greater concern. If the organizers wanted to let the participants know who they'd be facing, they could have announced it openly. Respectively, if your strategy is too spot on, that would pose questions.

A sudden chill went through Dallion.

Am I in trouble?

A single fight doesn't make a pattern. Some people adapt better than others. Maybe you were just lucky or maybe you had faced similar fighting styles before. If you run to Spike before each battle for information, however, it will become noticed. And trust me, if there's one thing that nobles hate most of all, is anything to ruin their entertainment.

The conversation moved to the guild tournament, which was the highlight of the event. Once the arena winner was acknowledged, members of all eligible guilds would engage in a city-wide free-for-all, during which each guild aimed to eliminate all members of the opposition, becoming the sole power remaining. There was no time limit, but based on past instances, the whole thing never took more than three days to end. The winners would receive recognition from the countess herself on the day of parting the closing ceremony before she left Nerosal, bringing the festival to an end.

After the snack was over, Dallion went back to the basement, where he went on training. Gen had made a replica of the fighting field based on the first day of fights, the space being twice as large as before. Dallion's focus, however, wasn't on the whip blade alone, but rather his handling of the Nox dagger. Twenty hours later, Dallion took a break, then repeated the whole thing three times more. An hour before dawn, Dallion had done the equivalent of a month's regimen. In many aspects that was good, though when it came to hunger, he felt absolutely famished.

Six fights remained till the top eight; six fights he had to win. And then there was the matter of the birch protector. Dallion still wasn't sure what he was supposed to tell her. The reason he persisted with his solo expedition was to find out what the Star wanted there. Something told him that wasn't the answer the dryad wanted to hear. It didn't help that the shield wasn't feeling cooperative on the subject, either.

You must eat, dear boy,

Nil reminded.

Lots of places are open by now.

And plenty of people are awake and eager to have a bite before the tournament.

There was no denying that. Faced with the prospect, Dallion went to the only place he knew that he knew would have enough free space to serve him. The only downside was that it was going to cost him quite a lot. For the moment, money wasn't a huge issue, but if Dallion continued to spend as he did, it could well become so.

Welcome, sir, Dallion was greeted the moment he entered the inn in question. A combat split flashed. Your food will be with you in a moment. And let me congratulate you on your success during the first fight. May the Moons grant you victory today as well.

Thank you. Dallion took his seat. I'll do my best.

Before he could ask whether there were other tournament participants, the woman had gone. So much for a nice conversation. Not knowing what he had ordered felt somewhat unnerving, but at least Dallion could relax that it was something he'd like. And soon enough, three large plates were placed at his table. However, that wasn't the only surprise. As Dallion started eating, someone else sat across from him. Someone Dallion had an unpleasant experience with.

Spectacular victory, Alien Eval said. Especially considering that you weren't supposed to use familiars during the fight. At least no one bothered to consider you could. That's the problem with the people of this world: so little imagination.

Dallion stared at him. The mage who had warned him to back off was at the very same table, sitting calmly as if the two of them were good friends. Dallion could see him shimmer, indicating that he, too, wasn't from this place.

Don't stop on my account, the mage said. If I wanted to do anything, I would have already. You're lucky that the imperial found you amusing. He's eager to see you fight, possibly even make it to champion.

I'm eager to become champion as well, Dallion tried to sound more confident than he was.

How can you be sure about that?

Maybe you'll get there. All sounds beyond the table suddenly ceased. You were warned not to persist with this. You neither have the skills nor the strength, so keep away.

You want me to quit the tournament?

I don't care about the tournament. I don't want you messing with the Star or the countess, and you're doing both. Since you didn't get the hint last time, let me make it clear. Keep away, or you'll end up like your grandfather, and we both know what that means.

Dallion jumped up to his feet. Everyone in the vicinity looked at him, confused. Several people split, creating instances of themselves to check out the situation. Since Dallion remained calm, the situation didn't escalate. More alarming, though, the mage had vanished, as if he had never been here.

No waiter approached Dallion more than likely they had already done so in an instance and since Dallion hadn't done anything rash, they had decided to maintain the calm atmosphere of the place. The only reasonable thing to do was for Dallion to do the same.

He was with you at the table, dear boy, theres no doubt about that.

And hes still eager to stop me.

I wouldnt be surprised if noble politics are involved. That doesnt explain why hes so focused on the Star or the countess. In the grand scheme of things, being the ruler of a county doesnt make her remotely important, not as far as the Academy or the Imperial family are concerned. The only thing I can say is that youre not the target, although somehow you seem to be a potential obstacle.

So, what do I do?

For the moment, keep your distance from the Star, and that means no more expeditions in the sword. At least until we figure out more.

Chapter 344: Wonder Kid

Ive improved the leather, Eury said as Dallion was putting on the boot shed given him. Itll handle the flame, but nothing else will. After your fight, give me the other one and Ill fix that as well.

Thanks. Ill do that. Dallion stood up and took a few steps. The boot felt slightly snug, but that was to be expected with new leather. Eury had modified the insides so it could handle both his kaleidervisto and dartbow. Its great. How much do I owe you?

Its fine, the gorgon smiled. However, she was still wearing a blocking ring, making it impossible for Dallion to determine what emotions she had. Youll owe me one. Just dont get it ruined in your first fight.

I plan to have just one fight today, Dallion said with an air of confidence. There was no jokiness in his words, as far as he was concerned, they had moved back to being just friends.

I know. A cluster of the gorgons snakes focused on the door. More and more of the tournament challengers were coming in. Good luck. Ill be waiting for you after the fight.

Sure.

Dallion looked back down, pretending to adjust the holster boot. Eury must have gotten the hint, for she left soon after. Things were better this way, or at least thats what Dallion told himself. It had been fun while it lasted, but now he had more important things to focus on and a relationship was making that complicated.

Very funny.

Dear boy, the only way to get through life is to laugh at it. Sometimes I wonder whether you planned this all out or just were very lucky.

Part of both.

Given the forces he was facing, Dallion had no chance of surviving if they went straight out. However, the attention he had gotten also served as his protection. The city Overseer was already keeping an eye on him, and since the first fight, so were Countess Priscord and the member of the imperial family. That made Dallion relatively untouchable in the short term. The moment people lost interest, it would be a whole different ball game. The trick was to gain enough power by then to be able to handle the inevitable fallout.

The opening will start in one minute, a tournament official rushed into the room. Get ready and please make a good impression out there. Good luck!

Taking a deep breath, Dallion followed the rest along the corridor and out onto the field. The stands were already packed by the time he got there. The countess was discussing something with the Lord Mayor, and interestingly enough the overseer. That wasn't a good sign. From Dallion's limited experience of watching new coverage back on Earth, the only time a person of importance had a chat with the head of security was when there were actual concerns.

The sound of trumpets filled the air, followed by a wave of fireworks. To his amazement, Dallion saw the fireworks write the number 2 in bright, multicolored blasts of light. This definitely was entertainment at its best.

Finishing the conversation, the Lord Mayor and the overseer left the countess' balcony, returning to their seats. About the same time, the imperial arrived, accompanied by the mage.

Dallion frowned. He'd only met the mage twice so far, but utterly disliked him. There was a certain sliminess that surrounded him, not the arrogance of the general, but something different.

The moment the fireworks display was over, all noise ended. Everyone on the field and in the stands looked at the countess. A confident smile on face, the woman clapped her hands. With that, the second day of fighting officially began. Calmly, the contestants went to their grid spaces.

Cool that you made it, someone whispered. Looking to his side, Dallion saw Celia standing a fair distance away. Being a semi-fury she had the ability to manipulate air and direct sound a fair distance away, it seemed. Gola didn't. Hope to see you in the third round.

Dallion smiled and nodded.

Dallion's opponent was waiting for him by the time he got to his fighting spot. One look was enough to tell she was a mercenary and a veteran one at that. Scars covered her arms and part of her neck. The woman was six-foot five, at least, her almost bronze skin making her muscles all the more pronounced. Grey eyes, with short brown hair, Elvira was wearing typical ranger clothes with no armor whatsoever. Using his forging and music skills, Dallion could sense several metal blades hidden in her boots and belt. Her main weapons, as expected, were two chains wrapped around each of her forearms.

So, you're the wonder kid? the woman asked, not in the least bit impressed. I thought you'd be taller.

Likewise, Dallion replied, causing the woman to arch a brow. I mean, I thought I'd be taller as well.

There was a long moment of silence.

Good one. The mercenary cracked a smile.

Then again, mercenaries aren't a tough crowd.

A split second later, Elivra split into four instances, all of them charging at Dallion. The fight had begun.

Without hesitation, Dallion split as well, facing all of her instances with one of his own. So far, his opponent acted the way he expected her to. The month of training he had gone through the night before had made Dallion come to certain conclusions. Given Elivra's experience, it was obvious she'd go for a ranged attack followed by a follow up at mid-range. One chain would aim for Dallion

directly with the other following a few seconds later and adjust to his reaction. It was a good plan, but also had an obvious counterrushing in at her.

Taking full advantage of his guard skills, Dallion avoided the first chain by a hair and kept on going. This made Elvira pause her attack and instinctively jump back. The second chain flew forward at Dallion. It was slightly unnerving how good the woman was at using combat splitting, even if she could only handle four at a time. However, there was one thing that she hadn't calculated.

A blue flame emerged from the sole of Dallion's right boot. After this, everyone at the arena would be aware of his advantage, but it didn't matter; information leaked quickly in awakened circles.

Dallion's speed tripled as he flew towards his opponent avoiding the second chain. Three feet from her, Dallion raised his right leg, aiming directly at Elvira. Even after combat splitting the light was enough to blind her for a moment and that was the precise moment Dallion took to grab hold of the first chain, then slash it with his Nox dagger.

A loud scream filled the air, as the guardian of the chain segment cried out in pain and agony.

Dallion's hands trembled as he mentally prepared for another scream. If the chain didn't act the way he hoped he would have to finish the job and that meant no repair would be possible. When the piece of metal bent open far easier than it was supposed to, Dallion let out a sigh of relief.

Moments later, he jumped back out of Elvira's vicinity, holding roughly three quarters of her right chain.

Returning the dagger to its place, Dallion drew the whip blade extending it with a flick of his hand. Now each of them had a ranged weapon. There was one major difference. While the mercenary didn't seem terribly afraid, the parts of the other chain were. Now that they knew that Dallion could hear them, they started shouting, explaining that they never were meant to be used on the battlefield. Apparently, while their owner had made a name for herself fighting in this fashion, she had never actually bought a weapon for the purpose. The chains were always of the common variety she took from a blacksmith's before heading out on a mission. Considering the dangers of the wilderness, that made sense, but was also quite sad. Any chain taken by her had the very real danger of ending up dead or discarded long before she reached her destination. The arena battle was no different.

It didn't seem there was much loyalty between Elvira and the chains. Then again, Dallion didn't expect there to be, everything considered.

All I need is a chance to break the connection. I promise I'll mend you once the fight is over.

Crackling blade, Elvira said. Cute. There's a lot more of them in the wilderness. She started spinning the other chain.

Bandits? Dallion asked, raising his armadillo shield.

Creatures. The way she said it suggested that she went through a lot of chains on her missions. You're different. You don't have any bloodlust. Also, on the field, no one can die. She threw the chain at him.

It wasn't difficult to avoid a flying chain. Dallion, however, knew better than to try. For her to make something as obvious meant she had something else in store. Taking the full brunt of the attack with his shield, Dallion lashed out at her with his whip blade. That proved to be a mistake. Bending back, Elvira let the line of metal segments pass above her, then similar to Dallion, grabbed it with her right hand. The remnants of the first chain kept her hand safe as she held on, while her left drew a dagger from her belt and struck Dallion's whip blade.

A resounding clang filled the air, the same that Dallion had heard hundreds of times whenever Nox tried to sharpen his claws in his domain. There was no way Dallion could have seen that coming; the opponent of this fight had a dagger similar to his own.

Looking at it, Dallion saw that the echo was correct. The dagger that his opponent was holding was very different from his own. The blade wasn't made of metal, but of some other material that Dallion hadn't seen. Also, it had its own guardian that wasn't a familiar.

Splitting into three instances, Dallion tugged the whip blade back. Seeing that she couldn't harm it in any way, Elvira released it, then straightened back up.

The fragments snapped back into place. Nox dagger versus crackling blade. This was going to be a tense fight and while Dallion's whip blade was immune to the effects, Dallion's harpsisword and armadil shield weren't. And just to raise the stakes, Elvira drew a second crackling dagger.

Cautiously, Dallion took off the shield strapped to his left hand and dropped it to the ground. This was one thing he didn't want to risk.

Chapter 345: Fighting Pain

The arena battles went on. Unlike the first day, only a few challengers had managed to win their fights. Most of them were already touted as potential champions. As for the rest, they exchanged blows, displaying weapons and techniques that fascinated the crowd and amused the nobles. Of the two-hundred and fifty-six fights, however, seven drew the greatest attention. One of those fights was Dallion's, and despite his best efforts, it remained evenly matched.

Pain races throughout his body as the cuts he'd received kept growing like cracks on a dry waterbed. Nil had been right when he'd said that the daggers Elvira had were different from his; their damage potential was significantly greater, not to mention that the agony created had almost brought him to the ground. Even Lux's efforts were unable to numb the pain, just somewhat reduce it. Meanwhile, Dallion's opponent didn't seem in the least affected. The wounds were there, Dallion could see them, spreading along her arms, but for some reason they didn't seem to cause her pain in the least.

No, Dallion hissed.

Given Elvira's weapons, that wasn't a guarantee. Besides, even if it were, using a shield now would only make it more difficult. Even the whip blade he was holding felt ten times heavier than before. According to Nil, that was a side effect of her daggers. If so, Dallion would only be able to take a few strikes more. The issue was that carving skills and acrobatics were a terrifying combination.

Almost on cue, Elvira rushed forward. Creating five instances, Dallion retreated, twisting the whip blade around himself. One of the instances slashed the forearm of his opponent. That was the one he chose to keep as reality.

Good. Keep it up.

There were too many metal objects on Elivira to be able to tell for certain, not to mention there was no guarantee that the item was made of metal.

Seeing his hesitation, Elvira charged at him again, leaping in the air and attacking from above. Dallion responded by combining guard and acrobatic skills. Alas, that time none of his instances remained unscathed. With the speed of a woodpecker, Elvira pierced through the thick leather of his right holster boot, effectively ripping off Dallion. In the process, she had received another wound, but that didnt matter in the least.

Things were looking bad for Dallion. In his desperation, however, an idea was born. It wasnt the best idea, but it was the only one that had the potential to turn the battle around.

Which of you are magic? Dallion asked, using his music skill to add as much boasting and agreeableness as possible.

Elvira paused. She couldnt understand the question, and it would have been difficult for her to do so, since it wasnt addressed to her or any other person at the arena. Rather, it was meant for the items on her.

That means there were three magic items. Not as many as Dallion thought there'd be. He already knew that two of them were the daggers likely they were the ones with the jackal voices. That means the female voice had to belong to the protective item.

I dont want to hurt you, Dallion continued, adding a heavy dose of fear.

You wont, Elvira replied, missing the point completely.

If you dont fall off, Ill have to.

Taking this as a provocation, Elvira charged forward. Dallion had no choice but to react by spinning his weapon as he prepared to engage in close combat again. While doing so, though, he continued to try and pinpoint the magic item.

Elvira didnt have any necklace or earrings, and as far as he could tell, she didnt seem to be wearing any rings on her hands either. Where then? It had to be in contact with her skin, so it couldnt be hidden in a pouch somewhere. Maybe it was in her boot? Holster boots were common, considering there was a name for them, but if that was the case, how should he proceed to remove it?

All three of them? That was unexpected. Dallion knew that his opponent had several more daggers in her belt, but had assumed them to be normal. Clearly, some were, but not all. It also made sense that she would resort to using her pain nullifying weapon. When Elivra had recognized the effects of Dallions weapon, and mistaken them to be similar to her own, she must have quickly taken the appropriate countermeasures, which means pain nullification.

Two daggerstwo targets. Which was Dallion supposed to go for?

Eilvira reached Dallion, engaging in her methodical attack. Two daggers against a dagger and a whip blade. In close proximity Elvira had the clear advantage, but then the most unusual thing happened. As Dallion moved to parry one of the daggers with his own, his opponents weapon flinched. It was barely noticeable, lasting a fraction of a second, but Dallion noticed. For that single instant, the dagger slipped in Elviras hand. Dallion had been in similar situations many times back on Earth when playing video gameswhen the controller would slip after hours of play, leading to a game over and the inevitable rage quit that followed.

As the tip of the blade tore through Dallions shirt, it made Elviura loosen her grip. That was the moment Dallion was waiting for, striking her hand with his knee. Normally, that would have little effect, but in the present circumstances, Elivra let go of the weapon. It only happened for a moment, but that moment was enough for pain to hit her like a ton of bricks.

Dallion felt the sensation explode within her, ringing like a chorus of bells. Taking advantage, he spun around, landing a sidekick, then following up with an attack with the whip blade. Before the sharp metal fragments managed to reach her, however, they froze mid-air.

Dallion Darude wins! someone shouted from the stand.

The announcement came as a surprise, causing both Dallion and Elvira to leap back and look in the direction of the countess. As a further surprise, the noble was looking directly at them. A simple nod on her part said everything that was necessarythe fight had been deemed over and Dallion declared the victor.

After a moments hesitation, Dallion did. A smile formed on the countess face, after which she directed her attention to one of the remaining battles. Almost instantly glowing symbols appeared around Elvira and Dallion, along with the warm sensation of healing.

All part of the show, I guess.

Mages and the festivalintolerable on their own, but when combined, they create a headache of epic proportions. The worst part is that its looking more and more like this will become the new standard. Having real fights is far more spectacular than people hitting each other with wooden sticks. Mark my words from next year, the countess would have convinced the academy to send a mage or two as part of the event.

I dont see that as a bad thing

Congratulations, the mercenary approached Dallion. You werent that bad.

Thanks. You werent"

Luck played an important part, of course. Even with your weapons, you wouldnt have won if my hand hadnt slipped.

I guess youre right.

Thinking about it, she wasnt incorrect. Rather, everything that passed for luck was just the end result of Dallions ability to converse with items. He had heard that treating an item, or area, badly could result in mishaps, but up till now never had he imagined that the opposite could be possible as well. Intimidating a dagger into slipping was definitely a first, not to mention overpowered as heck. And that wasnt even considering that Dallion could use his music skills to target items in a far more subtle way than before. Even if a person was wearing blocker items, their clothes and gear werent. With enough conviction and manipulation, Dallion could even make people trip on their shoelaces if people had shoelaces in this world and no one would suspect a thing.

Still, youre not as bad as they say. Elivra gave him the proper recognition. The emotions within her indicated that she was more impressed that she was letting on.

I plan to get better.

You must if youre to win the next fight. Its only guildies and champions from here on. Wildcards tend to fizzle out in the first round. Externally backed, like me, last a few rounds longer.

In other words, the difficult part was yet to start. Funny how often Dallion kept hearing that, and at the same time, it was true. In the world of awakened it was all about leaps to progress further. Things that had seemed impossible half a year ago seemed trivial now. No doubt after another year, Dallion would look back and wish he had to face todays challenges.

Any advice you can give?

Dont rely on tricks.

You relied on tricks as well.

And I lost. You could have too if luck was on my side.

Shes right, dear boy. Your strategy was sound, but it did rely exclusively on your weapons, namely on the abilities of your familiars. Without those, you would have lost.

That sounded way too philosophical for Dallion, but he got the point. His current battles had become an intricate chain of gear and ability combinations that, when working together, brought him victory. Break one thing in that chain and winning was no longer ensured.

Can I give you a piece of advice? Dallion asked as he made his way to the remnant of his boots on the ground.

Go ahead. The woman crossed her arms.

Treat your weapons better. Especially your chains. For someone relying on them in battle, you really neglect them a lot.

After he took his boot, Dallion went to the chains on the ground and picked them up. True to his word, he repaired both segments that had broken during the battle.

Nice. And the other?

Nox.

Nox?

Hes a level four now, and that comes with something new the ability to challenge guardians directly.

Chapter 346: Items and Secrets

While waiting, Dallion examined the room through the kaleidervisto. The only echoes were those in armor pieces stacked up for the gorgon to repair.

I hate it when you do that, Eury said, adding the finishing touches to his boots. Being a gorgon, she could do that while still keeping a few eyes on him.

Lots of clients I see, he said awkwardly.

The usual suspects. All of these are orders from before the festival. Ill get to them once the madness is over. Until then she cut the final piece of thread and lifted the holster boot. There. Done.

Dallion checked out the boot. It seemed the same as before, but even he could tell that it had been improved. That made him relieved. After his fight with Elvira, Eury had offered to loan him an entirely new pair and scrap the destroyed one for parts, but he had asked whether she could save it. Given the amount of damage that seemed like an impossible task, but somehow the gorgon had managed.

I cant keep fixing this after every battle, you know.

Ill pay you back, I promise.

I know youll try. Its not just about that. You she stopped abruptly. Never mind. Youll be you, I guess. Any closer to finding the copyette?

Im following a few clues The tournament is making things a bit more difficult.

Wasnt it supposed to make it easier?

Dallion looked at the gorgon. She was still wearing a blocker ring. For the life of him, he couldnt tell what she was feeling. She could just as well be furious at him, or forgive him altogether. A voice in the back of his mind urged Dallion to tell her about his new ability. Maybe when she learned that he had a hidden stat, things would return to what they were before? It was a huge risk, but maybe it would be worth it?

There was no way to respond to that. It wasnt like there was anyone who could teach Dallion how to use the ability. According to the sparse information Gen had found in the ring library, it was said there were a few empaths in the world, although no details were specified. For all Dallion knew he could well be the only human with that ability.

It was, but Ive been seeing more chainlings than copyettes, Dallion replied. I think they might be targeting the countess.

Dal

I know it sounds absurd, but I saw one working at the arena construction when I during my prelim final and"

They are targeting her. Euryale interrupted. Her voice almost echoed in the room, followed by complete silence. When you stumbled on that creature at Performers Plaza, it was pretty much confirmed. Theres a Star cult in the city. Why do you think Ive been wearing a blocker? And dont give me that crap that you had no idea.

Shame and hope mixed in one. Dallion felt stupid all of a sudden. Of course, there would be a valid reason for her to wear a blocker ring, not just to get back at him. That was stupid and egoistical of him. And yet, as much as Dallion wanted to hope that nothing had changed between them, he also had a feeling that hed be wrong. Both things could be true at once.

The tainted artifacts, the increased number of awakened deaths, someone taking on the mirror pool, those are the markings of a cult, Eury went on. Before they only passed by the city to pick up some artifacts, then went on to cause problems elsewhere. This time, though, they stayed.

Things became so much clearer now. Even without his music skills, Dallion felt he could believe her. That had to be the reason that Arthurows had come here.

Can you be telling me this? Dallion asked.

No. The gorgon smiled, placing her hand on his shoulder. But I felt I should.

Im sure you can, but shes not protected by a Moon. The Star cant harm you directly. Chainling cultists are powerful entities, but they pale in comparison to the one that gave them their power. Why do you think she keeps her blocking ring on all the time? So that no one in the realms could see her. Is that enough, however?

Thank you, Dallion forced himself to say. As painful as it was, he felt that the voice was right. Was that why you went on the expedition? To find out more about Arthurows?

The overseer thought so, but that turned out to be a bust. If theres anything, its at the bottom of the ocean.

Dallion swallowed. Eury had no idea how right she was.

Is March involved?

A lot of people are. It takes strength to find and defeat a cultist cell. The biggest danger is of it growing. The festival is a particularly bad time. With so many people coming from across the province, some are bound to fall through the cracks. If it wasnt for the surprise visit of the mage, we would have been stretched thin.

Sadly, that only held true if the mage was on their side. While Aliens loyalties remained unknown, it was pretty certain he had no intention of stopping whatever the Star was planning.

There was no answer.

Damn you, voice! Tell me!

Once again, the decision was left to him. The voice hadnt argued against, but it hadnt argued for either.

One more day, Dallion told himself. Hed take one more day searching for whatever the Star was trying to find, and after that hed tell March and Eury everything at least when it came to the sword.

Do you think I can pass the next round? Dallion changed the topic. Judging by the way the gorgons snakes stirred, he got the feeling she appreciated the change.

As you are? Depends. Everyone knows your tricks now, so youll have to learn some new ones. Theyll put you against people you have a chance of beating, but Im not going to lie, itll be tough. Are you planning on leveling up till then?

Yeah.

Good. Better do it twice. Today and tomorrow before the tournament. Dont stretch yourself thin, though. If you feel that you cant handle it, just quit the trial.

The advice, as usual, was very different from Nils. While the echo preferred a steady and methodical growth, Eury sounded more like a force of nature. Had she been like that in her world? Dallion hadnt gotten to ask, and doing so now would be rather pushy.

Natural silence formed in the room. There was a lot both wanted to say but at the same time didnt. Once again, Dallion found himself wondering whether to use combat splitting and have a go. Vend had warned him not to, but for every rule there were exceptions, and this could well be one of them.

The proper thing was to ignore the workbench. It was just a casual comment, made by a guardian that Dallion didnt even know well. Thats probably the reason Dallion found that he couldnt resist.

How epic?

Knives and sticks flying all over the place. Eury had to spend a whole week fixing everything. If you ask me, the guy was lucky. After the things he pulled, I thought shed petrify him. Between you and me, she was really close. Well I think she was really close.

That didnt sound good.

How many boyfriends has she had?

Why did she break up with him?

No idea. Things seemed to be going fine, then suddenly they didnt.

Youll also need some proper armor, Eury said, putting an end to Dallions hidden conversation. Something that would work in the real world. Id offer to help, but

Right, right. Dallion put on a fake smile. Anyone you can recommend?

No one I can think of.

If its about the money, I"

Everyone's just busy with the festival. Keep in mind that blacksmiths are people, too. This is the one time of the year they get to relax and enjoy a spectacle, same as everyone else. For once, it's their customers that have to amuse them. You can't take that from them.

Sure. Dallion nodded. Can I make one?

Nearly all snakes on the gorgon's head turned to look at him, like a class of students at the arrival of the one who always came late. It was difficult to determine whether she was impressed by the question or thought it ridiculous.

Are you sure you can handle it? Eury asked.

I have to start at some point. Besides, if I mess things up, I can always not wear it.

The gorgon cracked a smile.

Alright. Go ahead. Just don't set the place on fire. She made her way to the door. You still have your key?

Err, yeah.

Use it to lock up after you're done. And don't forget to eat.

That ended the conversation. It wasn't the most awkward resolution, but a clear indication that things weren't as they were before. Left alone, Dallion went to the pile of damaged armor pieces and picked up a breastplate. Thanks to his forging skill, he could see the weak spots all over it, like veins throughout the metal. However, even making something like that was going to be difficult.

Chapter 347: Two Kinds of Forging

It had taken Dallion two hours to flatten a metal ingot to the point he could form the rough shape of a breastplate. Even with Dallion's improved body and forging skills, however, the result was highly questionable at best. Thanks to what Eury had taught him, the material was pretty much flawless. Getting the shape, though that was a different matter altogether.

Initially, the flattening had started well. When it came to stretching and curving, things went downhill. Mistakes were made forcing Dallion to try and compensate, which led to further mistakes, and ultimately to him thinning it way more than he should have. In the end, the plate ended up being only slightly thicker than a sheet of paper.

There was nothing Dallion could say. For several minutes, he stared at the disaster that was supposed to be his first piece of armor, after which he calmly returned the hammer to its place and let out a deep sigh. One thing had become clear from all of this: being an awakened from another world didn't make him a forging prodigy. Dallion suspected that, but had decided to give it a go to see where he stood. The good thing was that knowing his real level didn't make him disappointed. On the contrary, it gave him an adequate estimate of his skills. Also, a bit of physical labor was what he needed to clear his mind for a few hours.

The companion armor seemed far too amused by the situation. It was bad enough that, as it turned out, the two were chatting buddies. Apparently, guardians were far chattier than one would imagine. All the times Dallion had been to the workshop with the armadil shield, it and the workbench had chatted quite a bit.

Instead of an answer, Dallion went on to do what he should have done in the first place.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The awakening room appeared. For once, no one was there to welcome him. With the addition of Vermillion everyone preferred to spend most of their time at Harps tower. Even the armadil shield had moved his domain to be nearby, with Dallions permission, of course.

Meow. A somewhat larger Nox entered the room, walking confidently to Dallion. Gone were the days when the cub would eagerly rush towards him like a bundle of fluff. Now the crackling was somewhere between a cub and a grown puma. The spark of adventure, though, was still visible in his eye.

Hey, Nox. Dallion petted the crackling. Youve grown a lot, havent you?

The creature purred.

I guess its safe to say I wont be carrying you on my head anymore. Why are you the only one here?

Because he continues to dislike water, dear boy. Furthermore, we thought you might need some personal time after this mornings attempts at making armor.

Wow. Thanks a lot for the vote of confidence.

Oh, and just in case. Id highly recommend you make a few pieces of awakened armor before proceeding to level up? Theres no telling what your trial be, but usually, its always better to have good protection.

How about it, Nox, want to help me make something cool?

The crackling flicked its left ear. Taking that as a yes, Dallion proceeded to forging. There, summoning a large iron ingot, he got to work.

There was no question that forging in the awakened realm was far easier than anything in the real world. Even with his limited level of iron forging, Dallion was able to see enough markers to achieve in minutes what it had taken him hours in the real world. And the best part was that thanks to Nox, he was able to cut out the shape quickly and without any fuss.

The crackling didnt seem particularly interested in the whole process, but as usual was happy to assist its owner.

Soon enough, the final result was visible.

BREASTPLATE CREATED

Youve successfully constructed your first breastplatesimple but solid.

Your forging skills have increased to 3

Finally! Dallion held his creation with both hands. Having successfully constructed it, meant that he would be able to summon it at will. More importantly, he had finally improved his forging skills. There was a deep sense of joy and achievement that Dallion hadnt felt since had successfully played his first chord, back when he was learning his music skill.

Inspired by his success, Dallion went on to create an array of armor. Grabbing a few scrolls from the ring library, he managedafter a few attemptsto create shin guards, shoulder guards, several helmets, gauntlets, and a few knee protectors, inspired by Dallions blading gear back on Earth.

As each new blue rectangle appeared, informing Dallion of his success, his forging skills increased until they reached thirteen. A pity they couldnt transfer to the real world.

Well done. Nil entered the room. The way things are going, youll need an armory. Which might be a good thing with all the empty rooms you still have. Honestly, dear boy, you tend to be wasteful with space.

And you keep reminding me. Dallion looked at the half gauntlet hed made. It was by far the most complicated item he had constructed, with as much effort going into forging the parts as assembling them.

Not a bad start. The echo stood next to Dallion.

Dallion would agree, however, he also knew that it wasnt enough. If he was to get stronger, hed need to learn how to use each of those components in combat rather than just carry them. A while back, Eury had told him that armor could be used as part of his guard skills. At the time, Dallion didnt have the stats to do so. He did now. Before that, though, he needed to level up.

Can you clean up for me, Nil? Dallion asked. I need to do something.

Of course. Just one piece of advice, if I may. Dont allow your plans to rule you. Being prepared is commendable, being inflexible isnt.

Thanks, Nil. Ill keep it in mind. Dallion went into the corridor. There, he went to the first new door and stepped inside.

The leveling trial started as expected with a rectangle and a walk along a long corridor. At this point, combat splitting had become second nature for Dallion. Since there was no telling what he might face, every step could end up being a trap, potentially a fatal one. After all, there was no guarantee that the trial didnt focus on caution.

After a while, the tunnel split into three. That was sneaky. Dallions combat splitting didnt allow him to choose the correct one. Relying on his music skill and perception, he carefully examined all three possible options.

All of the tunnels seemed identical. The smell of the air, the drafts, even the pattern of the stone tiles were an exact match. Everything suggested that there was no difference in what choice Dallion made, which was precisely why he didnt take any just yet.

Both emerged above him.

Guess youll need me after all, the shardfly said. Whats the matter this time?

Are all passages real? Dallion asked.

This is your realm, of course they arent real. None of them are illusions, though. Gleam fluttered to the left passage. I can go down this one and tell you whats at the end.

That was a good idea unless that was the trial. Three options, three familiars. Almost on cue, Nox also appeared.

Will you be able to handle it?

Just because Ive reverted to level one doesnt make me defenseless. The shardfly didnt sound particularly pleased. Ill be fine. Rather worry about your part.

Lux, Nox, how about you?

The firebird chirped eagerly, while Nox calmly continued straight ahead, taking the middle path. Clearly, they were confident in their abilities as well.

Okay, go ahead.

All three familiars went down their respective passages. Dallion watched as the firebirds light disappeared in the distance, then waited. It was pretty obvious that this couldnt be the means to solve the trial. At the same time, it was likely to be the trigger that started it.

Minutes passed. No noise came from any of the tunnels.

Instead of an answer, all three passages sealed up in front of Dallions eyes. Clearly, he wasnt going to get any help from them. A short while later, a new passageway emerged, continuing forward.

Drawing his hapsisword, Dallion continued forward. Soon enough, the tunnel became pitch black. Without Luxs help it was impossible to see where Dallion was going. Surprisingly there didnt seem to be any traps or holes along the way, just a very long stretch of darkness ending in an arena field.

Strangely specific, Dallion thought as he emerged beneath the cheers of the crowd. Around him the stands were packed with people, each yelling his name. As he walked further, however, he realized that it wasnt him that the crowd was cheering, but rather his opponent.

Long time no see, Dal, an echo of Dallion said. Very impressed you made it this far.

The echo shared Dallions appearance, but the similarities pretty much ended there. The clothes and gear were completely different. Instead of a harpsisword, the echo was equipped with a whip blade; also, his armor was the real thingfull plate armor, covering him from top to bottom.

Marchs armor? Dallion asked.

I found it suitable. Its supposed to be the most impressive set of armor youve seen. Personally, I have my doubts, but theres no accounting for taste.

Your familiars arent here, the echo-Dallion said. It would be too easy if you used them to win. We cant have them play the challenge for you.

As if thats ever happened.

Oh, it has quite often. For this trial, though, you and only you must make the difficult choices.

Im starting to see the pattern. Each time Dallion had to face an echo of himself, there was a choice to be made. Furthermore, based on past experience, such trials involved coping with a new ability. Given that the only new ability came from his empathy stat, it wasnt difficult to see where this was going. Whats the test this time?

Its rather simple, actually. All you have to do is defeat me. No fuss whatsoever, right?

But? Dallion crossed his arms. Theres always a catch.

Never a catch. Always a choice.

More voices added to the mix. Every piece of armor the echo-Dallion was wearing was a different entity with a mind and voice of its own.

Naturally, thats the choice: how many items are you willing to kill to defeat me. And yes, I do mean kill, since thats the only way to deal me damage.

Chapter 348: A Victory of Screams

Two armadil shields were summoned in perfect unison, each appearing on the left arm of a Dallion. Moments later, each of the two opponents went into an identical stance. The crowd erupted in cheers once more, it being impossible to determine who exactly they were rooting for. If Nil were here, hed probably say something obvious, such as theyre cheering for the winner, and from a certain point of view he would be right. The trick was for Dallion to make sure that he was the winner and not his echo.

Red and green markers filled the arena, forming a cats cradle of potential attacks and defenses. In many aspects, it was as if Dallion was looking in a mirror.

I keep facing you again and again, Dallion said. Is it the same you, or another echo?

Why cant I be one and the same? Red lines emerged from the echos sword, indicating the attack it planned to make.

Seeing the markers made Dallion feel a bit nostalgic. There was a time when his entire strategy was based purely on them. Now, he had progressed so much that he could perform his actions way before they appeared.

I guess Ill have to defeat you to find out, Dallion said, filling his words with fatigue and slowness.

If you defeat me, Ill promise to explain it to you, the echo replied, countering the effects with just as much music skill. At this point, it was clear that it wasnt going to be an easy fight.

In theory, all Dallion needed was one good hit to be victorious. However, that task was made more difficult by the armor that covered every inch of his opponent. Only the head remained unprotected.

Two sets of instances appeared, each countering the other in a complicated game of chess. Dallion had the clear advantage, being able to split slightly faster, but no matter what he attempted, the echo always managed to stop the attack in the nick of time. Twice Dallion increased the number of instances, going beyond his limits, and each time the echo did the same. For all intents and purposes, this was looking like a long mirror match.

The echo spun back with a backflip. Using one of his instances, Dallion followed, though not for long. Before he could attempt an attack, the echos whip blade extended, slashing through Dallions instance like a piece of paper.

Dallion froze. The tide had turned. From here on Dallion would have to spend more effort defending himself than the echo, leading to a long fight in which he was on the losing side. Just as nearly all the times before, if it came to a battle of attrition, Dallion was going to end up losing.

Without hesitation, Dallion unsummoned his harpsisword, replacing it with a whip blade of his own. He was a fraction of a second too late.

MEDIUM WOUND!

Your health has been decreased by 10%

In that fraction of a second, the enemy blade had gone through his defenses, slicing his shirt and left shoulder. Immediately Dallion attempted to strike back, but his attack was easily deflected using the echos armadil shield.

The whip blade is Cassie? Dallion asked.

Surprised? The echo smiled.

The blade has no guardian.

Your blade doesnt. My gear is different. The blade, the armor, even the dartbow bolts have guardians.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion recited the names of the seven Moons. He needed to be calm to win this, calm and focused. Using everything he knew, Dallion tried to come up with a plan. How to fight an enemy that mimicked all of his actions? This wasnt the first time he had faced such a challenge. Back in the awakening temple near Dherma, the echo had confused him into thinking that he might not be real. Dallion had resolved this by shooting himself in the leg, thus proving he wasnt an echo. The present circumstances were slightly different, but the riddle was the same; that meant the solution would have to be the same as well.

Twirling his whip blade around him, Dallion then let it fly at the echo, while also summoning his harpsisword once more. Then, as the echo deflected the attack, Dallion played a chord. He knew that targeting his opponent directly would be of no use, so he focused on the armor he was wearing, adding scorching heat to every note.

The echos first reaction was to attack so as to break Dallions concentration. That didnt work. Focusing exclusively on defense, Dallion easily evaded all the attacks while still playing his harpsisword. As a result, the echos armor became hotter and hotter.

Didnt think that would work on you, Dallion said with a smirk. All this time and you still fell for the same trick?

Suddenly, a chorus of screams and wails filled the air. Every piece of armor the echo was wearing shouted in pain and agony.

Stop! Youll melt us!

Surprise turned to fear, then to regret. Dallion quickly ended his melody, in order to stop the guardians screams.

Well done, the echo said calmly. Nice try, but that isn't the way to pass the trial. Well, I suppose it technically could be, but you'll still have to kill a guardian or two.

Dallion frowned. He had already realized what the real question was. On the surface, it was quite simple and indeed linked to his empathy ability. However, just because it was simple to understand didn't make it any easier—the only way for Dallion to win this battle was to kill several guardians in the process. A week ago, he wouldn't have given the matter any thought. However, back then, he wasn't able to hear items scream.

It isn't easy, is it? the echo asked. Empathy provides a lot of advantages, more than a person should have, according to some. However, it also comes with its price. You were inclined towards empathy from the start. That's what made you able to receive boons and understand guardians; that's what helps you catch the attention of a Moon. However

However, it's also the hurdle I need to pass, Dallion finished the sentence.

Yes. The echo withdrew his whip blade, snapping the fragments together again. You saw that during your last fight. The right thing to do was cut up the chains, but you couldn't do that.

I did.

You never broke a link. You just damaged them for a while. That won't always be the case. Moving on, you won't be able to save every item. Sometimes you'll need to destroy them in order to achieve your goals.

Despite the obvious logic, the words sounded repulsive. It was pretty much the same as telling someone they had to sacrifice people to get what they want. As things stood, Dallion wasn't prepared to do either.

You've no idea what the world really is, the echo said. You've only seen the calm of the cities, whether people are guaranteed a safe existence under the protection of the domain guardians. If you want to survive beyond that you'll be forced to make such choices.

The echo unsummoned his weapon. In its place a full helmet appeared. The echo put it on, then approached Dallion, stopping a few feet away.

It's not a matter of skill, the echo went on. It's all about your will. In time, you might become strong enough to reach your goals without destroying items. Or maybe you never will. Unless you're willing to accept it, though, you'll remain at your present level. One hit. That's all it takes to defeat me. However, by doing that, you're guaranteed to destroy at least one guardian. What will you do?

That was why Dallion's familiars weren't allowed to take part in the trial. It was Dallion who had to make the choice, not them. Neither of the three would have any issue doing so: Nox was a crackling, Gleam was a creature from the wilderness, and Lux well, Lux, was a special case, but even he didn't have any qualms on the matter.

So, this is it? Dallion asked. Kill or fail?

They're still items. Do you feel bad about killing echoes?

The truth was that Dallion felt very much uncomfortable. That was one of the reasons he preferred to use instances rather than echoes in combat, even now.

Also, you didnt seem to have issues breaking items in the past. You didnt like it, you didnt do it for fun, but you still did it. Why should it be different now?

Because I know that destroying the item destroys the guardian. Real destruction, not just banishing them after a level up.

Thats not it.

Damn you!

As much as Dallion hated admitting it, the echo was right. The main reason Dallion felt troubled was because he could hear them, and if he could hear, was felt obliged to empathize. Even before he knew that guardians died when an item was broken. He had seen that frequently happen when he worked at Hannahs in. Still, it hadnt caused him any pain back then. If he were honest, it probably wouldnt cause him too much pain even now as long as he didnt hear the screams.

Could this be the real reason that the Green Moon had stopped granting its powers to people? Not to punish them, but rather to prevent them from going through this. Empathy didnt just grant something new, it changed every aspect of life. It was the same as awakening, but on a whole new level.

You know how this works, the echo said. Make the choice or leave it for later.

Just like that?

Just like that. It has to be your decision. Everything else is immaterial.

No.

Dallion split into seven instances. Each instance, however, did exactly the sameleap at the echo and strike at the echos neck. While doing the strike, though, each instance played a different chord. In all cases, the chords were linked to the echos helmet, sending different emotions.

In five of the seven instances, the helmet budged, and things didnt stop there. The shoulder guard and other armor segments shifted around a bit, allowing the harpsisword blade to slide along the echos shoulder, continuing into the neck.

There was a loud poof followed by a series of clanks as the suit of armor fell to the ground. Total silence filled the arena. No one in the crowd said a word. Pausing for a moment, Dallion looked around. When he did, he saw that the people were gone as wellall the stands were empty.

Interesting choice, the echo-Dallion said, walking past him. You convinced them to help you out. Well played. However, you wont be able to pull it off each time.

Probably, but that wont stop me trying.

Youve chosen a difficult path. You wont become a hunter that way.

Its my choice. I know the cost, I know the consequences, and Im willing to do all I can to kill as few as possible. Guardians included.

As you wish. Its an unexpected choice, but it is a choice thats good enough.

You have broken through your barrier

Your level has increased to 24

Choose the focus that will serve you best

Chapter 349: Path of the Empath

According to the newly visible information in the ring library, there were said to be seven paths of the Moon. That had been discovered once Dallion had passed his latest awakening trial, thanks to an unexpected rectangle that had emerged.

PATH OF THE EMPATH

You have decided to follow the GREEN PATH. While rewarding, it is also the most difficult to follow.

Dallion had tried to ask his echo regarding the exact meaning of that, but by the time he opened his mouth the room itself had vanished, leaving another empty moon. It was at that point that he had a hunch that some of the previously hidden knowledge might become visible to him, and he was right. Going through several scrolls, Gen found quite a few explanations regarding the hidden stat, as well as two of the three hidden skills. More importantly, one of the blank scrolls had gained its title: The Seven Moon Paths.

Each path was in effect a philosophy associated with one of the seven attributes. First was the Blue Path, the path of dominion. Second was the path of wisdom, or Path of the Scholar. Supposedly the copyettes had started along that path before being misled by the Crippled Star. Third was the Path of the Warriors, or the Red Path, reserved for those who wished to reach the height of strength in combat. Next was the Orange Path the Path of the Thief. Of all the paths, that was the one that made least sense for Dallion. He had seen quite a few furies so far, and he didnt associate any of them with thieves. If anything, hed call them scouts, warriors, or at worst messengers. Apparently, the world or rather, the Moons didnt agree with him.

Fifth was the Path of the Adventurer, or the White Path. Next was the Green Path that Dallion had started to follow. The last was the Purple Path the Path of the Mage. Supposedly, following a path was a calling, bringing a person closer to a Moon. In a way, it could almost be considered as being a sort of favored, but with significantly less benefits. Details were unclear, but from what Gen had managed to piece together, for dedicating his life to protecting guardians best he could, Dallion was going to be viewed more favorably by them. On the surface it wasnt much of a benefit, but it made Dallion feel relieved. His guardians approved of the decision, most of his echoes didnt. As for the familiars, they were just annoyed that they didnt get to take part in the fight.

After every was said and done, and Dallion left his realm to return to the real world, the reality of his forging incompetence hit him like a wet blanket. For several seconds, he stared at what was supposed to be a breastplate, wondering how he had managed to achieve such imperfection.

Very funny, guys.

Taking a deep sigh, Dallion went back to work. Having developed his skills in the realm did provide a benefit. At the very least, he saw that the only way to fix his monstrosity was to melt it down and start again, which he did. This time, Dallion went for something simple a knee protector. After a few hours, the metal shape was done and adequately, at that. There was a momentary sense of achievement, although it was soon overshadowed by a sense of eagerness and urgency.

Dallion remained silent for another few seconds, then went to find a suitable strip of leather on the shelves. His thoughts were still elsewhere. The items in the room sensed that because they all went silent.

Measuring the strip, Dallin placed it on his left knee. His improved perception and mind allowed him to determine and memorize where he had to cut without marking it. When he was satisfied running it in his mind, Dallion returned to the workbench and started attaching the metal piece to the leather.

There was no reply, but Dallions music skill told him he was right.

What is she?

What does she want?

Id seriously prefer if you dont get involved. You already have a whole library of scrolls, whats one more?

We all have things from our past. Sometimes its better that they stay there.

Shield

I dont know what she wanted.

This was the first time that Dallion felt the shield openly lie to him. This was unusual. The dryad guardian could have refused to say anything, using the Moons rules as an excuse. Instead, this had happened, meaning that not only did the shield know the answer, but likely so did Dallion.

There were so many secrets in the world, and so many more to come. No wonder so few wanted to become seers. All the awakened who ventured forth entered a completely new aspect in the world. The first two gates were basically a tutorial despite the difficulties, everyone remained in an invisible safety bubble. No one bothered thinking about the big picture, rather focusing on the small problems in their settlement domain. It was very much the same as in Dherma village, yet more polished and not so openly hostile. The Lord Mayor didnt bother filling the domains of the local inhabitants with limiting echoes. The world itself was the limiter.

Dallion went back to forge pieces of armor. After a few more hours, the second knee protector was done. Both items seemed more or less alright, even if they were a bit rough. Before putting the final touches, Dallion went out to have a bite. An hour later, he was back, and the armor crafting continued.

Evening came, then night. All in all, three and a quarter pieces of armor were done: two full knee protectors, a neck guard, and the start of a half gauntlet. The shield had remained silent, although Nil had said quite a few words of encouragement. Even Gleam had told Dallion not to worry about the appearance, since as long as he linked the items, she could modify it, at least in the eyes of others. That sounded like a good idea, although Dallion didnt want to link them just yet. Instead, he went to inspect the realm of each item, and especially their guardians.

As expected, the guardians were normal crittersirondillos in the case of the knee protectors, and a shell-lizards in the case of the neck guard. The interesting thing was that all of them addressed Dallion as their creator. The title seemed more ceremonial than anything, since it didnt grant Dallion any benefit whatsoever. He still had to face and defeat the guardians to improve them, and what was more, they were stubborn enough not to agree to a draw.

Finally, it was past fourth time at which Dallion decided to return to the Icepicker guildhall. He didn't feel an ounce of nervousness as he made his way through the empty streets.

Why are you worried?

I don't think you're ready.

I've been hearing that a lot lately. If I'm not ready, I'll just fail.

Not in that sense. You're moving too fast. Becoming an empath is more confusing than you think, and yet you can't feel it because you haven't taken a moment to stop and think about it. What you do now will change your world even more at the worst possible time.

I don't think so.

After he reached the door of the Icepicker building, Dallion knocked. The door was opened almost instantly.

Yeah? Spike asked, semi-asleep.

I'm here for more training, Dallion lied, adding a subtle trace of sleep in his voice.

Come in. The elite stepped aside. Dallion could feel his exhaustion and could also smell a large amount of alcohol.

Is Vend upstairs?

No Vend tonight. Spike closed the door. I'm on my own this time. Me, and whoever's in the basement.

You don't look so good.

Spike frowned.

Rough night. I'll be up. Don't wake me unless it's morning or the guildhalls on fire.

Right.

This was better than expected. With Vend absent and Spike in the state he was, it would be easy for Dallion to sneak into the sword room. Of course, he made sure to be methodical about it. The first Dallion did was to go to the basement and grab a training item. Surprisingly, there wasn't anyone in charge there either. By all accounts, the entire guildhall was left under the care of a single person. Given that it was Spike, maybe it wasn't the worst idea. No one would dare do anything of the sort during the festival, and those that did have Spike to deal with, who was always itching for an excuse to get into a real-life fight.

Half a minute later, Dallion had snuck his way back into the sword room.

WORLD ITEM AWAKENING

I know. Dallion sighed.

Strictly speaking, that wasn't exactly true. Harp and shield could potentially earn him the win, especially if Dallion's familiars were also involved. However, that was a scenario Dallion preferred to avoid. At this stage he was here just to check out a theory of his. Any actual fighting could wait.

The vine whale was nowhere to be seen outside the temple. That was slightly disappointing, although not enough to have Dallion be concerned.

I'll rely on you, Lux, Dallion said. Get me to Lastport.

The trip was brief and pleasant. Thanks to March's expeditions, Dallion got to see the pleasant greenness of the lands beneath him. Maybe he was starting to get used to this world too much, but he felt that this could be a nice place to actually live, or at the very least go on vacation. It could be just like spending a few months in the countryside, and to make things better, the two months spent here would only be a second in the real world.

As Dallion passed over the mountain, the vine whale appeared. This time, there was one minor difference—the guardian was sitting on it.

Hello, there, Dallion shouted. The Moon Cleric smiles and waved. You won't try to kill me, right?

Not this time. The dryad tapped a spot on the whale next to him. Moments later, vines grew out, weaving together to form a chair. It's much more comfortable here.

While Dallion could feel no hostility emanating from the guardian or the minion, he still felt uneasy. Even so, what was there he could do? Fighting was out of the question, and running would get him nowhere.

Cautiously, Dallion had Lux fly him into the seat. It turned out far more comfortable than Dallion expected it to be.

I can only take you to the edge of the next coast, the guardian said. But I wanted to spend a while to talk to you.

Any reason for that?

Plenty of reasons, but I just wanted to use the excuse to talk to someone I haven't spent several millennia with. That's one of the sad paradoxes about invaders. Our duties as guardians is to stop them, and yet people like you represent the only source of distraction we could hope for. Some even call it a source of entertainment.

I keep hearing that a lot.

And you'll be hearing it a lot more now that you've become a full empath. The Green Moon offers many gifts, constant company is one of them.

Dallion laughed.

There was a time when this place was full of otherworlders, the guardian continued. In fact, that was its purpose.

Dallion gritted his teeth for a moment. The shield guardian had been lying to him for longer than he thought.

It was one of the conditions that the Star made when he offered the knowledge that would conquer the world. As a token of goodwill, the Star also granted us the knowledge to create world items.

If Dallion could allow himself to gasp, he would. Everything he thought he knew about the sword had turned out to be false. This wasn't a sanctuary, or at least not in the way one would expect it was an example of mass banishment. So many cities, all of them filled with otherworlders and their families there were no words to describe it.

Why?

Who knows? Maybe the Star feared otherworlders, or maybe it just didn't like them? The offer was made and accepted. Millions were sent to sword worlds while the war outside raged on.

The Star never kept its word. Dallion looked down.

We always knew that was a possibility. When the invasions or expeditions, as you call them began we had our confirmation. Tell me, are there any surviving dryads in the world outside?

Dallion hesitated.

No. But they aren't dead. They were banished to the realms. All of them, as far as I could tell.

Unexpectedly, the dryad started laughing. It wasn't a bitter laugh, but rather a laugh of relief, as if he had finally gotten resolution. Dallion could only watch and remain quiet.

Sorry about that, the guardian said. I was just admiring the irony.

It's a bit dark for me.

I know. That's why I came to talk to you. The rest of the guardians might not understand. It's very different for those who've only seen one world. They'll take it far worse. It must have taken millennia for him to come to grips with what had happened.

Him who? Dallion lost the connection.

Your shield guardian, the Moon Cleric replied. I can't tell his exact rank, but I know he was a military officer one who believed that the star would usher in a new destiny for all dryads. To be honest, at the time, I felt the same.

Chapter 350: The Sword Marshal

There was no response.

Sure.

The shield guardian never hid that he had taken part in the war. Given the scale of the war, that was to be expected. However, he had never gone into any specific details. If anything, he had downplayed his involvement. It was now obvious that he knew a lot more than he claimed.

The world was a different place back then, the shield said out loud. Its strap extended, allowing it to slide off Dallion's arm.

Moments later it changed form completely, transforming into a dryad in a military uniform Dallion hadn't seen before. Crimson vines flowed down the left side of his shirt, continuing up to the belt

from which hung a long wooden rapier. While the face was the same, there was almost no similarity to the companion shield that Dallion had grown to know.

A marshal? The Moon Cleric arched a brow. No, not just any marshal. You were a sword marshal, weren't you?

Dallion saw shame form throughout the shield's entire body.

What's a sword marshal? Dallion asked.

Remember when I said that there were many such swords? To ensure compliance, the high conclave entrusted each world to one of their capable army elites, just in case. Those who had the skills and experience were given the title sword marshal. They had tens of thousands under their command and carried with them a weapon that housed millions more.

Sword?

Vihrogon, the sword dryad said. My name was Vihrogonhe who banishes winds. And yes, I was a Sword Marshal. What is more, this might have been my sword.

Emotions stirred throughout Dallion like a whirlwind. He felt astonished, betrayed, confused

Might have been? he asked.

The world guardians aren't the only ones who considered we might be betrayed. The Star had done so before, so it was likely he could do it again. When the first signs appeared, I broke off of the main force. The shield guardian looked down at the sea. Several colonies of cracklings were visible below, floating like small islands on the surface of the water. A few of us gave up our command and rushed here, to the ruins of the old copyette capital. Fearing we might lose the war, we hid our swords among the ruins. What is one more artifact among so many? If we ended up being wrong, we could always return and reclaim them. If we were right, at least they had a chance to survive.

It was you, the Moon Cleric said. I remember how majestic you seemed back in the day. Now you hide, pretending to be a companion shield of all things. How the mighty have fallen.

It wasn't pretending, the shield sighed. When the time of banishment came, everyone had to face their past and make a choice. Some lost their minds, reverting to their primal form and living on as feral guardians. Others chose to forget, taking on an existence that would help them escape the memories of their past and the desire they held.

Leaving us in our prisons

It was better than the alternative. At least this way you had a chance.

Dallion, the Cleric turned to him. Are there any dryads in the world?

Dallion shook his head.

Then the chance was wasted, the Cleric said. It's funny. I never expected to see any of you here, especially after all that time. I had always assumed that we'd die out long before anyone came, even if you did win the war. Even back then, the leaders of the great conclave were so focused on conquering the world that they didn't think it through.

How can you share these things? Dallion asked.

Thanks to his music skills, he was able to continuously observe the emotions that appeared and disappeared within the two. It was like watching bubbles in a pot of boiling water. One thing Dallion suspiciously didn't see were lies, although there remained a lot of secrets as large as potatoes and located in the chest areas.

Didn't the Moons prevent that?

Not for those that walk the same path, the Cleric replied. A human empath dedicated to follow the path. I suppose if it were to happen, it would have been a human. Your kind was blessed to have less limitations, though even then, the Green Moon rarely shares his gifts. I can share anything I know, but sadly it isn't much.

Not much? Dallion couldn't believe his good luck. Finally, there was someone who could talk to him without restrictions. No longer would he have to hear the you're not ready speech or have vital information kept from him.

For the most you know more than I do, the dryad said. Maybe you know even more than the Sword Marshal.

That's hardly possible, Dallion smirked.

Sadly, it is, the shield dryad said. Memories are not meant to last that long.

Dallion's smile faded away.

What do you mean? he asked in the hope that his fears were wrong.

You start forgetting details after a few millennia. Now imagine thousands of them. Only things core to our existence remain, though even they aren't intact. I used to repeat my most cherished memories aloud, but that only lasted a few centuries. However, as new ones started to amass, everything merged. That's why we wrote scrolls and kept them somewhere safe so we never forget them.

As a new realization came, it left a bitter aftertaste. The giant library that Dallion had stolen was just a record of events; it was the memories of the guardians, gathered for thousands of years. When things had started going downhill, they must have stopped and placed those they cherished away. Dallion would have done so, at least. What would one record if there was nothing left to record? No cities, no settlements, no survivors? The shield must have realized that from the start.

Are there any dryads in the realm? the shield asked.

Only now you're curious? The Moon Cleric frowned. They died out a long time ago. First the wars, then the cracklings. A few sought shelter in the temples. Some even tried to escape. In the end, those that remained just got tired. That's the price of being banished to a world realm unlike us; they remained free, but only within the confines of their lives.

The shield remained silent, but the pain within him ballooned like an airbag during an accident. It must have been twice as difficult for him: coming to terms with a past he tried to escape, and realizing that all the things he'd done were in vain.

There could be some in another sword realm, but I doubt it. They would have found a way to the real world if they were alive, and as the human said, there are no dryads there.

If theres no one left, why is the Star so interested in this realm? Dallion asked, breaking the tension. On the surface it was a jerk move, but the dryads could thank him later. He was set on finding something. Could it be the means of escape?

The Star is still hunting? The Cleric glanced at the shield.

Sort of, Dallion went on. Hes planning something, but Im not sure what. All I know is that itll happen soondays in the real world.

There were some royals who stashed a few trinkets, but I doubt it would have the power to harm a Star.

The small grain of hope within Dallion, shattered, replaced by helplessness. He had always told himself that it was a long shot, but because of Arthurows interest, he had convinced himself that there had to be something. Learning that there wasnt rendered entering the realm pointless.

Thats not true, Vihrogon said. There is something. But you dont have the strength to get it.

What about you? Dallion asked. Can you get it?

No, not anymore. No banished can.

Dallion fell silent again.

Whats the item? the Moon Cleric asked. If there was anything of the sort, I would have known.

Like you knew about the Vermillion tears that were scattered about? the shield snapped. Only certain people knew, and those that did had the memory extracted from them, so the Star wouldnt find it. It was supposed to be a foolproof plan, the dryad laughed bitterly. Apparently we were wrong. He paused for a moment. The Twicrown, he added shortly after. Thats what was hidden. It had the power to help you escape from this realm and defeat the Star.

The Twicrown? Its just an ornament. There are dozens of them scattered among the ruins. Rulers have worn them for centuries.

Not the ones made here, one brought from outside and hidden away.

And you know where its hidden? Dallion asked.

Yes and no. All sword marshals who took part in this plan had their memories taken out in a temple of the Moons and given form. That was the only way to guarantee that the Star wouldnt know.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion recited the names of the Seven Moons. He had already gone down the emotional roller-coaster. He had learned too much, too fast. Back on Earth, he wouldnt have even blinked. Due to his love of puzzles, he might have actually enjoyed it, but he didnt risk anything there. Here, there was a lot more at stake, potentially his life, possibly a lot more.

I know where to find them, though, the shield said.

The dryad scrolls, Dallion whispered. They are your memories.

No. The dryad shook his head. The scrolls are the worlds memory. The white scroll is mine.

The protector was intrigued that a human would have empathy, but her last sentence wasn't directed towards you. It was directed towards me, the shield went on. Seeing her reminded me of a few things, but if I'm to remember the rest, I'll have to defeat her and claim the scroll.

Saying that, Vihrogon, reverted back to his shield state. As far as he was concerned, the conversation had ended. The Moon Cleric, though, didn't share his opinion, and continued to ask Dallion about what the real world had become. Dallion answered as much as he knew, but all the time he kept thinking about the past. There was no doubt a lot that remained unknown about the dryads and their empire. However, the second most important event in their history had been revealed, making Dallion feel as if he knew them.

He could only imagine what they must have gone through to banish all their otherworlders within world realms and hide the keys. According to what the armadil shield had said, many if not all realms had hidden within them the means to escape, as well as hurt the Star. The big question was why didn't they use that power against the Star to begin with?

The vine whale increased its speed. So far, the creature hadn't said a thing, but the revelation had to be a shock for him as well.

I'll take my leave, now, the Moon Cleric stood up. Rain will fly you to the city.

He can fly that far in?

Rain can fly anywhere he chooses. It's just not very safe. With your moonspark, though, I think you'll manage to pull through. He winked. Take care, Dal. I'd wish you luck, but not to the sword marshal. Too much was done for me to do that.

I understand. Dallion nodded. Thanks for the talk.

I hope it helped. I'm just sad that I won't be able to share any of this with the rest. Which is a pity, because there were some really good parts.

Vines emerged from the back of the dryad as he spoke. Tiny leaves spring from them, glowing in the light of the Green Moon. Then, a blink of the eye later, he was gone.