

Leveling up 371

Chapter 371: The Twi-crown

The eighth Moon surrounded by the rest but that wasn't the key part. Lines connected the central moon with the seven others. The width and angle of the lines created the impression that the Eighth Moon was shooting rays of light at all the rest. Or maybe it was the opposite? What if the Seven Moons were shooting at the Eighth? That definitely gave a whole new perspective on things. Unfortunately, Dallion wasn't given the chance to ponder on it.

Leaves detached from the vines chasing Dallion, flying through the air like daggers. Most were knocked out of the air by another wave of flying leaves no doubt launched by the armadil shield. However, some managed to slip by and hit their target.

Three new red rectangles emerged, each indicating a ten percent health decrease. Before more could hit, Dallion split into six instances. In each, he used his shield to block as many as possible. In one case, he managed to stop just enough to prevent another wound.

MINOR HEAL!

Your health has been increased by 5%

Unlike humans, dryads didn't fight with their body alone, but used any sort of plant to their advantage; and given that all structures except the temple were made of wood, not to mention the ground itself, that made for one giant danger area.

At this point, it was pretty obvious that Vihrogon was winning the fight below, which only made the other guardian dangerously desperate.

Gleam, what's going on. Dallion closed his eyes again.

Dryad chaos, the shardfly replied. Your dryad has wrapped the other in a cage of roots and vines. I guess it won't be long before the fight is over.

That was a clever move it kept the temple guardian from pinpointing Dallion's precise location, and what couldn't be seen, couldn't be targeted. Even so, it remained too close for comfort. A quarter of his health remained. One serious hit, or three leaves, and he would be expelled from the sword faster than he could blink.

Thankfully, no such thing occurred. No new projectiles were launched at Dallion in the next ten seconds. In the ten seconds that followed after that, the clusters of roots and vines that extended from the ground and walls of buildings crumbled away, turning into dust. By all indications, that was supposed to mean the end of the battle, but for some reason there still wasn't any rectangle announcing his victory.

Dallion remained in the air for another ten seconds enough for his entire health to be restored then combat split again. In two of the three instances, Dallion had Lux fly him back down, and very much to Dallion's astonishment, nothing happened. It was as if the temple guardian had been subdued, but still alive.

A single echo of Vihrogon remained, standing a short distance from the dryad. Seeing Dallion approach, the echo waved.

Gleam, is that real? Dallion asked.

Its an echo of your dryad, if thats what youre asking.

Stay vigilant, Dallion whispered. Lux, bring me next to him.

The firebird did as asked, although its flaming wings remained on Dallion even after his feet touched the ground.

What happened? Dallion asked the echo.

The fight is over, the other replied. All you need to do is go and get the twi-crown.

I didnt see any rectangles.

Its a stalemate. I told you I wont win your fights for you. The guardian cant harm you in any fashion. Ill keep it that way until we get out of here.

And I suppose you know where the crown is?

No, but I know how to find out. The echo led the way into the temple.

The inside was quite similar to all the previous temples Dallion had been to in this world. One by one, each of the rooms were carefully searched, and each time the prize was not to be found. Several dryad scrolls were found in one of the chambersa historic account of some ruler that Dallion had never heard of. However, the twi-crown remained as elusive as before.

Are you sure its here? Dallion asked.

Yes, the echo replied. The guardian wouldnt dare move it.

Well, weve been through everywhere. Gleam, check for illusions.

I didnt notice anything, the shardfly said, slightly annoyed.

Do it anyway, Dallion insisted. Please.

With a sigh, the familiar fluttered off, leaving the chamber. It would have been better if Nox had been here. The crackling could almost smell hidden compartments. Sadly, after being wounded, Dallion preferred that Nox remain in his domain.

You did quite well, the echo said. Considering your level, defeating one of his echoes was a big deal.

But? Dallion could tell that there was something on Vihrogons mind, even if the dryad was expressing it through an echo.

But its not enough to face the Star. I wont be able to help you in the real world.

The Star will be subject to restrictions as well.

Not as many as you think. Thats the thing about the Star and his cult: they dont follow all the rules. They can fly, disappear in the shadows, have the strength of ten awakened and a lot of other tricks they used to gain the upper hand.

Thats not what you wanted to warn me about, is it? Dallion could see the secret pulsing in the echos chest.

The Star will no doubt make you an offer. Dont accept it. No matter how good it sounds, have the strength to reject it.

This isn't the first time we've met, Dallion smirked, displaying fake confidence. The truth was that even after all this time, he was slightly shaken by what he had gone through during the confrontation in the Nox dagger. Ill be fine.

Hell make the offer once you're dying. Don't let him get that far.

What makes you think that?"

There's an illusion! Gleam flew into the room. Quite a subtle one too, but I found it.

Dallion hesitated for a moment, then followed the shardfly out of the room. All that had to be said was said.

The shardfly led them back to the central hall, then to the altar. Dallion looked closely. He had searched this place several times, paying special attention to every stone and space. This time, there was a slight difference: the stones on one side of the altar were, in effect, made of petrified wood.

They were made to look like stone, Gleam said. Not sure why, though. I tried to cut through, but they are solid. The only difference is the material.

A whole wall of the altar replaced by wood. There was no logical reason to do so. It wasn't like the altar was used. At some point in the past he might have, but the signs of neglect clearly indicated that it hadn't received care in the last few centuries.

Dallion tried pushing, pulling, playing a few chords on the harpsisword to make the section of the altar lighters, and still nothing. Then it hit him. The reason he wasn't figuring it out wasn't thinking like a dryad. This was their realm. For millennia, they had bestowed their knowledge on their children, who in turn had done the same with their children, and thus to the present day.

You can manipulate wood, right? Dallion turned to the echo.

My original can, the echo said. But he doesn't have to be here for that as long as there's a link between him and here.

I think the altar is a door. Of everything in this district, the temple is the only building not made of wood. I think that the original building here had been destroyed and the guardian had cleaned the area and placed this on top. The real chamber with the two-crown is deep below and the only way to get there is to transform this into a staircase so we can go down there.

You think that there's something hidden beneath the altar?

In a way. I think that the foundation of the original building here has remained intact. The altar is just the means of getting there.

The echo looked at Dallion, then at the altar. Slowly, the wooden section began to move, like heated wax. A small opening formed, then increased in size until it was wide enough for a person to fit through.

Doesn't look particularly safe. The shardfly fluttered closer. Ill check it out and let you know what I find.

Be careful there, okay? There might be traps.

Hey, Ill be fine. Worry about yourself.

As it turned out, there were traps and many of them. The opening in the altar continued down as for several hundred feet, before ending in a passageway. From there dozens of side corridors went on, splitting and merging together as they formed the most intricate maze Dallion had seen. The confusing part was that the maze changed each time Dallion and the echo passed by. The notion of a living labyrinth came to mind. The logic by which the labyrinth shifted remained a mystery. Maps and memory were useless. Even Gleam wasn't of particular help.

Can't you do something about the constant changes? Dallion asked.

That's beyond my abilities. This whole section was built to be a vault for the crown. If any dryad could get through it, it wouldn't be much of a hiding place.

The wandering continued. At several points, Dallion tried to leave markings on the walls or floor, indicating the direction from which they'd come from. Each time, the mark would disappear within moments, as if it had never been there.

What qualities does one need to have to be considered suitable for the crown?

The echo gave Dallion a suspicious glance.

I've no intention of claiming the title. I just want to know.

Strength and wisdom, the echo said. And the mental will to lead all the banished against the Star.

That didn't help too much. Every race valued these qualities, and somehow Dallion couldn't help but feel he was missing something. Normally, a leader was supposed to lead. This was obvious, although one had also to consider who the chosen was supposed to lead the dryads against. Fighting the Star required more than strength and skill, it required conviction, clarity of mind and

It requires a spark, Dallion whispered.

Huh? the echo asked.

Instead of an explanation, Dallion took a deep breath. He hadn't used this ability since defeating the heart of the crackling city. Honestly speaking, he wasn't even sure he fully knew how to use it. However, now was the time to learn.

Initially, nothing happened. Dallion remained in a silly position, his fist still in contact with the wooden surface. A few moments later, however, a faint glow emerged beneath his knuckles. Slowly, the glow built up until his entire hand looked like a white ball of lightning. When that happened, Dallion opened his hand. A spark, no larger than an inch, zapped between his fingers, before fizzling away.

A bit anticlimactic, the echo said.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion stood up. It was ludicrous for him to expect anything different would happen. Even granted an extraordinary gift, his skill was too low to adequately make use of it. A spark was all he could muster fortunately for him, that turned out to be enough. Acknowledging Dallion's potential, the wood in the passageway began to shift, as if it had transformed into liquid. All entrances were sealed, becoming part of the walls. The hallway stretched, extending to the size of a large hall, then kept on growing. A perfect circle was formed, in the center of which a small tree emerged. Hanging from one of the branches was the object that Dallion had come for: a delicate

crown made of intricately intertwined vines of white wood. On the front, a green gem the size of an orange glistened with its brilliance.

The twi-crown, Dallion whispered.

Awestruck, he stepped forward, taking the crown from the branch. The tree didnt do anything to prevent him. Holding his breath, Dallion turned the crown around to get a look of its other side. The only thing revealed was an empty hole among the vines the second skill gem was missing.

It seems were not the only ones after the crown, the echo said. Someones been here before us.

Chapter 372: The Unexpected Guardian

ZOOLOGY skills obtained.

You now have the ability to learn the complete anatomy of a creature, as well as its habits, behavior, and means of communication.

Dallion stared at the green rectangle. Any other day, this would have been magnificent news, bordering on euphoria. Now, he felt disappointment and a deep sense of fear.

I doubt its the Star, Vihrogons echo said. He wouldnt have stopped at one skill.

Who would? Dallion would understand someone getting here before him. That was always an option. He could find any logic for someone who would go through all that trouble only for one skill. Are there any restrictions keeping a person from taking more than one?

Not that I can think of. Its possible that the person was interrupted in the process. He could have claimed the skill, then gotten killed before claiming the second.

The explanation sounded plausible, but didnt feel right. It was far too convenient. Then again, all the other explanations Dallion could think of were just as worse. Nil would have been quite useful around now. Sadly, that wasnt an option for the moment.

Dallion put down the twi-crown. Without the gems it looked rather hollow, yet it remained an important symbol for dryads.

It could have been taken ages ago, during the wars of this realm, the echo said. Herbology would have been of a far greater benefit in this realm than the remaining skill. Especially for warfare.

Yeah. Probably.

If there was someone with the forgotten skill of zoology, life in the real world had just become considerably more dangerous.

What do you want to do now? The echo asked.

We go on, Dallion replied. At least we know that the Star wont be getting this.

That was a minor consolation, but there was nothing anyone could do on the matter. Zoology wouldnt provide much of an advantage when fighting the Star, but it might be useful when dealing with the cultists. The important thing was not to give up.

Reality shifted, replacing the wooden room with the one in the Icepicker guildhall. Dallions final exploration had come to an end. Now the difficult part began. Dallion turned around to leave the

room, when from the corner of his eye, he saw someone combat split. At this point, there was no longer any need speculating whether he would be caught.

I thought you might come here, Vend said, standing at the door. Only you would do something so recklessly stupid after being warned not to.

Sorry, Vend. Dallion turned around. Theres too much at stake.

And you dont think the overseer could do her job?

Half a dozen knives were visible on Vends belt. The elite had clearly prepared himself for battle. When he had said that he expected to find Dallion there, he must have also prepared for what followed.

Dallion relaxed his breathing. This was the worst possible time for a fight. It had been too soon after an exploration, not to mention that his head was still pounding from the intense focus concentration had had while fighting the final guardians echo.

Are you sure you want to fight here? Dallion asked, infusing each word with doubt and hesitation. And just to be on the safe side, he slowly pulled off the blocking ring he was wearing. I might lose, but it wont be pretty.

Under normal circumstances, Dallion would have no chance of success. Thanks to his Gleam whip blade, he stood a chance.

You think you can win? There was a note of pride in Vends question.

Maybe not. But I know that you wont leave the city to be harmed because of your actions. Even if theres a one in a million chance that I might save Nerosal, its better than me just sitting here. Dallion concentrated. In this battle, he was going to have to use his focus for as long as possible.

You think you can make a difference? You cant even win the tournament. Todays victory was the last one youd get and even it was due more to chance than actual skill. Yet, you think you can stand up to a cultist? Or the Star itself?

Unfortunately, dear boy, at this point theres nothing left but to let this play out.

I know you dont want the city destroyed, Dallion persisted.

The city isnt the source of joy you think it is. Youve had your dealings with the mirror pool, you know about the rot hidden beneath the surface. Whos to say that a massive shaking up isnt what the city needs?

Dallion could feel the bitterness. No doubt the city hadnt been kind to Vend. The elite had been a trouble in his youth. In a way, he reminded Dallion of Arthurowsnot the Star, but the vessel that had allowed himself to become its vessel. He too had spent his entire life in poverty and misery, living in a part of the city that even non-awakened wouldnt venture through without cause. Desperation had made him believe that the only solution was to make a deal with the Star, if only to have the city pay. What if Vend had gone through the same?

I know you dont really believe that, Dallion said.

Vend arched a brow.

Music skills, Dallion added. But even without them, I could see youre not a cultist. With your skills and abilities, you could have easily found a job in the provincial capital. Instead, you chose to stay here.

The elite narrowed his eyes.

I dont think youre only here to pay off your debt to March or anyone else who helped you. You love this city, despite everything broken in it. You wont let anyone destroy it.

Youre pushing it, dear boy. At least maintain a certain level of realism.

Dallion didnt respond. He needed as many words as possible to have a better chance of his music skills having an effect, but that wasnt all. Dallion hoped hed be able to change Vends mind. Something told him that there was more to the man. There had to be something in the city that had a strong significance for him. Something or someone.

Tell me Im wrong, Dallion said.

Up till now, the voice had always provided Dallion with good advice, saving him in quite a few tight spots. This time, though, Dallion decided to ignore it.

What if Im a cultist? Vend asked.

Id have known.

Not all cultists have chainlings inside. A lot of them spend years helping the Star until they are given the honor of transforming into something with power.

I still would have known.

This was the moment of truth. Every instinct told Dallion that he was correct in his assessment. Then again, he had thought the same of Arthurows. The tension in the air was so thick one could cut it with a knife. Both kept their eyes fixed on the other, ready to engage in battle if necessary.

Vends hand moved to one of the daggers, then suddenly stopped.

Youre right. Vend glanced at the door. There are a few things that I dont want destroyed. I wasnt joking when I said you wont make it.

Youre going to help me?

Every little bit helps. Besides, theres an advantage to having an otherworlder. Limits dont apply to you.

Whats the plan?

The vermillion tears, Dallion said. They need them to get the chainling here. If we find those, they wont be able to open the lock. We dont have to face the Star.

What did you need to enter the sword for?

There was a Vermillion ring in the realm, Dallion said. That was true and plausible just enough for Vend not to suspect anything. Dallion felt slightly bad about it, but he wanted to reveal as little as possible about his empathy attribute and corresponding skills. I have it now.

Dallion could feel the emotions within Vend change. Displeasure and annoyance emerged, then faded away, replaced by a sense of compromise and understanding.

Lets find the rest, the man said.

Finding a single ring in an area the size of a city was an impossible task by any standard.

Thankfully, the general being the duplicitous schemer that he was had marked the item he had sold them, letting him know its whereabouts within the city. There was only one setback marking was by no means a sophisticated method. While it allowed the general to know that it was functional and within the city, it narrowed down the search to a block or two. In this case, the item was somewhere in the vicinity of the Performers Plaza. Clearly, it was no coincidence that the chainling that Dallion had discovered was there. At the time, he thought it to be an accident; more likely the Star had already set his plan in motion.

Dear boy, if there was anything remotely interesting, the Lord Mayor would have obtained it already. Not to mention that the city guardian would have sensed them. No, whatever is there had been brought later.

Rather, I suspect its a structure. Or part of one. It wouldnt be the first case of someone building a house to have his descendants discover that one of the stones came from a set of ancient ruins and had access to a hidden domain from ages past. In fact, the guild used to get search jobs, mostly by the newly rich. After spending a fortune on an old structure within the city, the new occupants would often spend slightly more on the off chance that they would find something valuable. They rarely do, of course, but it didnt stop them from trying. That was until artifacts flooded the streets.

Nil says were supposed to find a building, Dallion whispered to Vend. Or part of a building.

Vague as usual. Vend didnt hide his annoyance. This might take a while.

With the tournament in full force, the number of people was far less than usual, even before the festival started. However, that only made Dallion notice how many buildings there were. Since they were located around the plaza itself, Dallion had been left with the impression that there were a few dozen at most. Looking closely, there were quite a lot, not to mention everything inside. Still, there was one big advantage.

Maybe not. Dallion eagerly went to the nearest pub.

Initially, there was silence. Then a single voice responded.

The ring changed guardians?

A common occurrence for sphere items, sadly. Once they fulfill their destiny they shove out their old guardians, leaving room for new.

That was strange. Dallion wasnt aware that a building guardian would be so well informed. Then again, the Well back in Dherma was the one who had kept the chainling safe until Dallion could claim it, so there was more to area guardians than one might think.

Why, hes buried beneath the plaza. Not the most dignified place to be, but as long as he doesnt bother anyone else, who am I to complain?

All the way on the other side of the plaza. Hes being quiet, but I saw when they put him there, shortly after that scene in the open. I must say you were quite brave, facing off a chainling. Those creatures give me the shivers.

This sounded bad.

Five or six. There used to be one always around until your fight. The sneaky things would leave just before the city guard arrived to inspect. It was rather annoying. Quite a lot of us were happy when you made that one show its true colors. For a while, none of them dared set foot here.

Dallion didnt like the sound of that either.

Chapter 373: Ruin Tunnels

Seventeen taverns and eight shops, all said the same thing: up to Dallions incident, chainlings had come and gone fairly frequently, sometimes two or even three at a time. Knowing what he knew now, Dallion could assume that by chainlings they meant the cultist he had fought. All that suggested that the area had seen a lot more activity than previously believed. The reason for that, though, still remained unclear.

Its deep under there, Vend said. He had spent a significant time combat splitting, checking the tiles at the square one by one.

Dallion took the kaleidervisto from his holster boot and looked at the spot in question. There was nothing to be seen. Apparently, turning a chainling into a guardian rendered the device inefficient.

Ive no idea how they placed it exactly, but taking it out will be difficult.

Im surprised the city guard didnt find this, Dallion said. Or the overseer. Wasnt she supposed to be able to sense these things?

Thats the whole pointyou cant sense it. I know its there because of the residual effects, but Ive no idea where exactly. It could be two feet beneath the ground, it could be twenty. Well need a dozen city guards only to dig up that thing, and no one would allow that during the festival.

Even with the entire city at stake?

Especially then. It would mean that the Lord mayor cannot secure his city. Even worse, itll mean that the countess doesnt know whats going on in her own county. Admitting that is the same as stepping down or inviting a new war of succession. There are people alive who still remember the last one, and they definitely wont take any rumors calmly.

A chill passed down Dallions spine. His grandfather was heavily involved in the wars of succession. His personal downfall aside, the entire province had been plunged in war lasting years. It was understandable why the topic might be touchy.

Time seemed to stop as Dallion went through all the relevant information. He knew that the Stars plan involved several Vermillions Tears, as well as the world item in some way. The Vermillion keys had been leveled up and buried in various parts of the city. Why, though? There didnt seem to be any banished creatures in the vicinity, so having them there was pointless. Even if these were just hiding spots from which items would be taken to be used later, it didnt make sense that they would be placed so

How deep could it go? Dallion asked all of a sudden. A couple of dozen feet?

Could be. I told you I cant be sure about"

What about a few hundred?

Not impossible, but they would have required a lot of digging, and theres no way that wouldnt have been noticed.

Im so stupid! Weve been thinking this all wrong. The clues were in front of me the entire time, and I didnt bother to look. Weve been here over an hour and we didnt ask the most obvious question.

How was the ring put there in the first place?

Without giving Vend a chance to say a word, let alone ask a question, Dallion rushed to the nearest three-story building.

How long did it take for the person with the item to dig up that hole?

Im not sure. Time runs differently for me. About ten years, Id say. Give or take.

How much would that be in real time?

Dal? Vend joined Dallion in front of the building. Whats going on?

Three seconds, Dallion burst out laughing. They made the hole in three seconds.

Thats impossible. You wont be able to move more than a tile in three seconds. The only way is to enter the area realm, and that would have been felt by the Lord Mayor and many of the other nobles.

Thats not true. Theres an easy way for it to be done. Give me a knife and Ill show you.

Suspicious, Vend took one of the knives from his belt and handed it to Dallion. Dallion took the weapon, then held the blade by the tip with two fingers and let it go. The knife fell steadily until it hit the ground.

Profound, Vend said.

Quickly, Dallion picked up the knife, then stood up and let it go again. The result was no different than before. Picking it up again, Dallion then split into a dozen instances, all doing the same exercises, only dropping it on a slightly different spot. After close to half a hundred tries, he finally stopped.

The only way to bury something so deep in three seconds is to find a hole that existed before.

Interesting logic, but theres nothing there. This has been a plaza since I could remember. If there was anything of interest, the overseer would have found it after your fights against the chainling.

Who says she didnt? Dallion stuck the knife in the crack between two pieces of pavement, loosening one tile. Applying enough pressure made the tile pop, revealing a small hole underneath. It seemed no larger than a copper coin, but Dallion suspected that it went down a long way. Whats the most important principle of this world? Dallion asked, looking up at Vend. You only learn the things youre allowed to learn. If there was a huge network of ruins beneath Nerosal, the Lord

Mayor and a select group of nobles would know about it, as would the overseer. Respectively, none of them would want the secret to come out.

Most of the nobles banished to this city must have been aware, as was the copyette. That had been the real reason that the Star wanted him dead not because of anything he said or because he feared his strength, but because he knew everything about the city upon which Nerosal had been built and how much of it existed buried beneath the surface.

Was there a fountain here? Dallion asked. Or a well of some sort?

Not in my time.

Do we have enough to warn the countess now? Or the mayor at least?

Not until evening. But I know a way of telling the overseer. If you're right, she'll act. We might get in a bit of trouble, but she'll look into it.

That was a potential compromise. Dallion still had second thoughts. Part of him questioned whether the overseer could be trusted. According to Nil, her only role was to protect the city, a role that she had done exceedingly well. However, she remained a chainling. If offered the prospect of freedom, would she remain loyal or become part of the scheme?

You warn the overseer, Dallion said. I'll look into this whole thing with the ruins.

We've discussed this. I'm not letting you do anything alone. You've filled your stupid quota for the year.

Someone has to warn the overseer, and after my mess up, that person isn't me. Dallion hesitated for a few moments. You can always join me once I'm done.

That seemed to convince Vend. The elite knew the importance of the situation. Nothing indicated how soon the Star's plan would come into effect, but the more they delayed, the less chance they had to get in front of things.

How will you get there? I doubt anyone will reveal such a secret, just like that.

They don't have to. I'll just find out which part of the city's sanitation system has never received a repair request. Someone at the guild will know. I'll ask.

Strictly speaking, Dallion wasn't lying. He was going to ask Nil, who was an echo of captain Adzorg. In terms of knowledge, it was the same thing.

I'll let the overseer know. Meanwhile, don't do anything too reckless. If you're caught, you'll be in serious trouble, and I'm not talking ten days in a prison item. If the ruins really exist, the secret must have been kept for generations. And you don't get to keep such a secret by being nice to those who uncovered it.

The implication was clear: if he came across any guards, Dallion might lose more than his freedom. Still, he nodded. At this point, the euphoria had filled his very being, urging him to see this through.

I'll join you as fast as I could, Vend said, then rushed off in the direction of the arena.

I'm not sure that was the right choice

You think so? If you ask me, he's the one doing the dangerous part. I wouldn't want to be the one to tell the overseer. As Vend said, there's no telling how she'll react. Besides, everyone's focus will be

above ground. All I need to do is get the Vermillion keys. The fact that the cultists had to use such methods to get the ring down there means that they dont have any other means of access. As long as I dont draw any attention, Ill be fine.

The old echo wasnt at all convinced by Dallions reasoning, but he let it pass.

Nerosals sanitation system was nothing like what would pass as a sewer system back on earth. It was less a comprehensive sewer system, rather than multiple sets of tunnels in the important areas. Dallions initial guess was that since only nobility and not even all of them enjoyed privileges such as plumbing and running water, it would be those sections of the city that had sanitation tunnels. As it turned out, that wasnt always the case: each area close to a water source had its own set of tunnels, providing water to several wells in that part of the city. The mayors palace, naturally, had its own, although it had been maintained diligently for the last twenty years, at least. According to Nil, the noble areas were the ones constantly requesting repairs. To them it was the same whether there was a single crack or the entire thing was about to collapse: they could afford to have it pristine, so they didnt hesitate to hire awakened every few weeks to check and fix what they owned. There was no way they would do that if there was anything to hide.

Im sad to say that your plan is flawed, dear boy. If something were secret, I wouldnt know about it at all.

The guard forts. I wouldnt say the visits often, but every now and again, someone from the Lord Mayors office goes there on an official visit.

Thats one possibility.

Theatres and the arena during festival time, also. Other than that, I cant think of

Back on Earth, the coliseum in Rome had a means to be filled with water, suggesting a massive and complicated water and draining system. While there was no guarantee that things in this world would copy achievements on Earth, the arena was the second place at which Dallion had seen a chainling.

Can there be any sort of tunnels beneath it?

Dallion was fully aware, however, he also had the feeling he was right.

I guess Ill meet back up with Vend sooner than expected.

Chapter 374: Hidden Entrance

There were two entrances to the arena. The main entrance was generally used by all. Larger than the city gates, it allowed large masses of people to come and go with relative ease. To ensure everything was safe, during the festival, three types of guards protected it. On the outside, and among the stands were the city guards. Being local, they were perfectly familiar with the neighborhood, as well as the ins and outs of the general sections of the arena structure itself. Their main role was to make sure that there were no disruptions of fights among the spectators. Additionally, the countless personal troops were also present. While most often they went where their ruler went, a small part of them would guard areas that she frequented, most notably her spot at the arena and her section of the Lord Mayors palace. Finally, there were the arena guards. Their goal was to ensure that there was no cheating or disturbance in the arena halls themselves. Most important, however, they were

the ones who blocked access to areas that were not for the general public. They were also the ones that guarded the second entrance to the arena.

What Dallion found out was that in addition to them, there was a fourth group or guards, or rather a single person who did more to protect the arena than anyone else: the Arena Master, who coincidentally happened to be the Lord Mayors younger brother. Officially at least according to Nilthe Arena Master was a ceremonial role with no real importance. In fact, it was so nonconsequential that it was seldom used or referred to. The person wasnt responsible for anything that took place in the arena, wasnt in charge of the tournament, merely the practical owner of the building. It didnt take long for Dallion to shatter that illusion. All that was needed was a chat with a few items to learn that there were, in fact, a lot of chambers and tunnels beneath the arena, and also that only a handful of people were permitted to go there.

But I thought items talk to each other all the time?

I might have exaggerated that point a bit. Items with guardians that have empathy do. As long as Im nearby, I can talk with others who have the attribute. Before our banishment, every race could have it. Afterwards, not so much. So, technically, old guardians can talk to one another when in close proximity, but its not a given.

Now do you see why empathy is so important? Even without skills, it can massively disrupt things, worse than echoes.

That was very true. It also explained why blocking items were so popular for important meetings. Of course, the majority of people were doing it in order to shield their presence from echoes and area guardians. If it ever came out that Dallion had the skill, he could well end up being hunted by everyone.

Good question. The truth is, I dont know. Either the person wont be able to take them in the first place, or theyll get the attribute as well. Skills cant exist without the attributes they rely on.

That was a chilling thought. There was a possibility that whoever had taken the other skill could also converse with guardians. Maybe that was what the Star was after? Not the skills themselves, but access to a Moon attribute hed never have otherwise?

Dal. Someone placed a hand on Dallions shoulder. Why are you here?

Turning around, Dallion saw Vend standing a step away. It was alarming how even without using his combat splitting, the elite could move about without being sensed. No wonder he had been a perfect thief as a child.

ITEM AWAKENING

A small metal room replaced the arena corridor. Dallion didnt usually pull people into the awakened realms, but if there was one thing he knew better than anyone was that in the real world, there was always someone watching. The only issue was that he had ended up the only person there.

Vend? Dallion asked, confused, hoping that the elite might be invisible or hiding somewhere. However, as much as he waited, there didnt seem to be any trace of the man.

Confusion turned into alarm. Dallion recited the names of the Seven Moons, then returned back to the real world. Vend was still standing there, his hand on Dallions shoulder. Seeing the confusion in Dallions eyes, Vend raised his other hand, revealing a pair of rings on his index finger.

Before Dallion could say another word, the sound of ceremonial horns echoed throughout the tunnel. Instantly, a rush of people swarmed through, trying to get back to the arena stands. The next fight of the day had begun, and although these weren't the winners' fights, there was a lot to see. Vend pulled Dallion to the wall until the crowd was gone.

Come along, the elite said and went forward.

Dallion followed him to a stone staircase, then up to the top floor, then on to a small metal ladder that led further up. Soon enough, the two were on the roof of the coliseum itself, just above the main gate. The entire town arena was visible from that point, not to mention the city itself as well as beyond.

No sooner had they gotten there than Vend pointed to his ring. Dallion nodded, then put on his own blocker item. Now they could finally speak freely.

What's this place? Dallion asked.

It's used for cleaning. All the mending in the world can't prevent leaves and dirt gathering up here. I wouldn't call it sanitation work, but it's pretty close.

You used to work sanitation? Dallion asked.

No. I used to take my lady here, the other replied. So, why are you here?

Err, right. Dallion's thoughts snapped back to the topic at hand. The tunnels leading to the ruins are beneath the arena.

Are you sure?

This is the only place that has a water system, but never gets repaired. Also, I spoke to a few statues in the halls. There are several sections beneath ground, and those aren't accessible to the general public. He paused for a moment. And I spotted a chainling here once.

Vend thought about it.

That's a pretty big stretch.

Maybe, but it makes sense.

Everything in the world makes sense. Doesn't mean that it's true.

Fine, in that case, why don't we take a look? Dallion was convinced that he was right. Everything pointed to it. However, he had found that it was far better agreeing with people who thought the opposite, rather than get into useless arguments. What did the overseer say?

She wasn't at the arena. No idea where she is. I told Eury to give her the message, though.

Euryale? Dallion felt his heart skip a beat. What was quite sudden, not to mention completely unexpected. What does she have to do with it?

Vend gave Dallion a strange look.

She works for the overseer. Most of the city's hunters do. There's the big difference between common awakened and hunters. Hopefully, you'll get to see what it is.

There was a pause. The elite looked at the arena. The fights had already started: sixty-four participants doing their best to diminish part of their shame by thrashing their opponents as

violently as they could. From the stands, the crowd cheered. Looking closely, Dallion was able to see that the countess wasn't present and neither were the mage and the imperial he protected.

Why isn't the countess there? Dallion asked.

High nobility doesn't usually stay for the matchups. Even during the later rounds. She's probably at the palace.

Dallion remembered the long explanation that Nil had given him earlier, regarding the politico-geographic implications that might arise should the countess be harmed, or worse should anything happen to the imperial who was her guest. Apparently, it would be better for her to face a wild changeling than be accused of endangering a member of the Imperial family. Many other noble families would pounce on her the moment she did, not to mention a number of foreign powers might take advantage of the chaos to get involved.

Most of the explanations had gone over Dallion's head. While thinking about it, Dallion caught a glimpse of Itella on the arena grounds. The noble only had one mace with him, but that didn't make him any less fierce. With each attack, the weapon changed form, making his opponent struggle to keep up.

Don't worry about him, Vend said, seeing what Dallion was looking at. And don't worry about the overseer. Things always reach her.

I guess. Dallion looked away. Any idea how we get to the forbidden sections of the arena?

Do you have your crackling dagger with you? Vend asked, to which Dallion nodded. In that case, it'll be easy.

There were many definitions of easy in the world. Dallion had no illusions that Vend's understanding of the word was a bit off, but even he didn't imagine the plan to follow. Given that the tournament was the highlight of the festival, even minor damage in the halls of the building was enough to cause an immediate stir. Vend dashed through quite a few corridors, occasionally dragging the tip of the Nox dagger, like a child keying the paint of a car. The difference was that Vend knew precisely what he was doing. Most of the cracks were barely visible, like strands of hair stuck to parts of the walls. That was the point, though. Vend had no intention of vandalizing the place just to get a few guards to rush to the scene. His goal was far more nefarious.

Individual cracks were well and good, but when several met at a certain point, something a lot more serious followed.

Get ready, Vend said discreetly, returning Dallion his dagger.

What did you do? Dallion quickly ticked it away, then looked in all directions. Vend had asked him to remain at the end of one of the main corridors, a short distance from the staircase.

Without warning, there was a loud thump on the ground. Moments later, a scream of utter terror followed. Organizers, guards, and the occasional civilians ran in the direction, curious as to what had happened.

Go, Vend whispered, urging Dallion to follow as well.

A small crowd had gathered in the place in question. Dallion could sense dread resonating all around.

What happened? he asked, adding just enough music in his voice to help him push his way to the front. What he saw was anticlimactic by any accounts: the bust etched in the wall had cracked to the point that the top of its head had fallen off. If it were up to Dallion, he would have taken some glue and fixed it up in a fashion that no one would notice. But for everyone present, it seemed like the end of the world was upon them.

The bust of the old count, Vend whispered to Dallion.

Cover it up! A woman who appeared to have the greatest authority ordered. And check all the other statues! If any other flaws are found, let me know. You! she pointed at Vend. You're an Icepicker, aren't you?

Only now Dallion noticed that Vend was wearing his guild emblem far more prominently than usual.

Both of us are, Vend replied.

The woman's glance turned from Vend to Dallion, then back to Vend. It was clear that she recognized who he was and wasn't too thrilled about using a rising star for such mundane matters. However, her fear of consequences trumped everything else.

Fix this, she said almost in a whisper. Your guild will be compensated.

The entire building? Vend arched a brow, almost theatrically.

Just the woman hesitated. Start from here. I'll go get the Arena Master. The woman went down the hall, while the rest of the guards and officials scattered about to check for other problems.

Not long after, Vend and Dallion were completely alone once more.

No one stayed to watch us? Dallion asked.

Why bother? The worst has already happened. There's nothing more we could do.

That still sounded strange, but Dallion decided to go with it.

It seems you were right. There might be something strange beneath the arena.

Oh? What changed your mind?

The woman. The first thing she ordered was for everyone to check for more cracks. That means she's used to such occurrences. Otherwise, she would have called the guard to search for a culprit. Actually, I was banking on that to happen. This is better, though.

Okay, so how do we get to the hidden section?

Simple. We do exactly as the woman asked. Then, when we find the point of entry from the realm itself, we use the dagger once more.

Chapter 375: The Wilderness Beneath

Ready yet? Dallion asked, keeping watch in at the end of the cross-corridor.

So far, they had spent over a week wandering the arena's realm, seeking places that seemed unusual. Even with Lux's help, the process was long and arduous, not to mention that they had to fight the constant hunger that had started to grow.

Finally, after everything, they had found what they were looking for: a vast chasm leading to a set of tunnels deep underground. Instantly, Vend was able to tell that this was a section that wasn't revealed to ordinary people. The presence of an underground lake suggested that the section had flowing water through it. All that work, however, had turned out to be the easy part. Matching the realm to the corresponding architecture had proven to be far trickier.

This would go a lot faster if I can talk to Nox, Dallion whispered, glancing over his shoulder.

A lot faster to getting us caught, the elite replied, slowly slicing through a section of floor with the Nox dagger.

Even with the cracklings leveling up, the dagger still lacked the ability to slice through stone. In order to succeed, Vend had to keep sliding its edge along the same outline over and over again. At one point, there was a barely audible crack.

Almost done, Vend said, pressing against the dagger just enough to go through. After considerable deliberation, he had decided that the best breach point was from a service staircase. Visitors stayed away, and the guards had been informed that Vend and Dallion would be mending sections of the arena.

The calm with which Vend proceeded suggested that he had done this before. Not batting an eye, he carved half the step in the staircase, then stopped.

Come here, the elite said. I need you to hold this so it doesn't fall in.

Huh? Dallion blinked.

Nothing to worry about. You should be able to handle it at your level. Just make sure your hands don't slip.

Here and here. Vend pointed to both sides of the step. Just hold it for now. I'll tell you when to lift.

Are you sure you've done this before? Dallion went to the step above, then bent down and pressed against the piece of marble.

Many times, Vend replied casually. The scarier part was that he didn't seem to be lying.

Bit by bit, the remaining parts were cut out. Dallion could hear the faint crumbling sound. At least this indicated that they had been right about the entry point. Thinking about it, the stairway probably had originally continued down unimpeded most likely during the original excavation process. At some point, a decision was made to seal it off, hastily at that.

For a moment Dallion wondered how such a secret could be kept. The original construction of the arena had probably involved thousands of people, if not tens of thousands. At least some of them should have talked. Then, however, he remembered the effects limiting echoes had back in Dherma village. Could it be that this was where the old village chief had gotten the idea from? If there were still people with echoes inside them fifty years ago, it would be a reason for him to start fearing the cities as well as use the knowledge to his advantage.

Ready? Vend asked.

Dallion nodded. With extreme precision, the elite sliced off the final segment of the step. A final crack was heard, after which Dallion felt the full weight of the block. For the slightest of moments,

the image of the step slipping away went through his mind. Panicked, he lifted it up quickly at which point his fingers slipped.

No! Dallion shouted.

The step, however, didnt fall. With his usual speed, Vend had managed to let go of the Nox dagger and catch it underneath. An expression of annoyance and disappointment conveyed his thoughts better than a two-hour shouting match.

Next time you mess up, Vend whispered. Just keep quiet.

Good advice, a familiar voice said.

Both Vend and Dallion glanced in the direction of its source to see none other than Euryale. The gorgon was standing there, arms crossed, observing both of them, and the corridor behind her. Dallion didnt need music skills to tell that she was more than a bit displeased.

The moment I heard there were problems down here, I suspected it might be you two idiots, she said. Are you in enough trouble already?

A bit, Dallion replied.

Not much, Vend said almost simultaneously. For a moment, the two looked at each other, then back at the gorgon. Were on to something, Vend continued. This time its real.

Euryale didnt seem overly convinced.

There are tunnels down there that shouldnt exist, Dallion said. He had the good sense not to try and sway her with his music skills. Were already made an opening. You can tell the guards and the overseer, or you can let us do this.

The snakes on the gorgons head didnt budge. That was her tell that she had come to a decision shed likely regret. Dallion held his breath. If things went the way he feared he might have to do something hed later regret.

Ill do neither, Euryale said. Someone needs to save your asses. Im going with you. And before anyone could protest, she went to the step and picked it up as if it were made of cork. Go ahead.

A minute later, the staircase appeared to be in the same state it had always been. There was no sign of Vend, Dallion, or Euryale. Anyone would think that everything was fine unless they carefully examined the lowest step in the staircase. Doing so would reveal that it was, in fact, loose and held in place by a few daggers wedged in from below.

Meanwhile, the trio continued their descent beyond the sealed off point of the staircase. A blue flame provided enough light for them to see, courtesy of Lux and the kaleidervisto.

You really think there are ruins beneath the arena? Euryale asked. She had been told the short version of their theory. As a hunter, however, she was even more skeptical than Vend had been. If I had known, that would have made my life a lot easier. I wouldnt have had to wander about in search for artifacts.

Theres no guarantee there are any, Vend said, an unusual note of annoyance in his voice. All we know is that there might be ruins, not that theres anything useful in that.

And youre basing all that on a single ring somewhere beneath the Performers Plaza? It could have been just a well.

I dont remember any well.

It wasnt a well, Dallion said firmly. I would have known. He couldnt reveal that he had asked a few building guardians about the possibility, but he was getting tired of the pointless arguments. Either way, well soon find out.

The staircase ended in a wide chamber, reminding Dallion of the layout in smaller sphere items. A maze of tunnels and corridors went on from there, with no indication what was going on. Occasionally, they would come across canals of water or pits of waste. Any type of signs or markers were noticeably absent, making it impossible to say where beneath the city they were. However, there was no doubt in anyones mind that they had moved bay beyond the arena.

I have to take my blocker ring off, Dallion said.

Thats too risky, Eury was quick to note. The moment you do, the Lord Mayor, the countess, and who knows who else will know youre somewhere youre not supposed to be.

I dont think so. The star wouldnt risk putting an item in a place where it would be seen.

Youre being reckless again.

No, hear me out. Dallion clenched his fist behind his back. Each domain has its boundaries. Buildings dont stretch into the domain of other buildings, just as they dont continue beyond their foundations. Isnt it the same for areas? I know the smaller ones are like bubbles within the city domain.

Theres only wilderness beyond the city domain, Vend joined in. The tunnel is clearly made by someone, so it must be part of a domain.

Ruins dont have domains, Euryale said. They are corpses of cities, so are part of the wilderness.

The description caused for a few moments of silence to form.

You never told me that, Vend said.

I didnt have any reason to. The gorgon moved closer to the nearest wall, then took out a dagger the size of a thumb and stuck it in. Nothing happened. No guardian, she said, causing Dallion to shiver at the thought. Could be wilderness ruins, or could be something broken to the point that it has no guardian. A cluster of snakes focused on Dallion. Its your call.

There was no other option, and everyone knew it. They had been walking throughout the tunnels for hours and still had nothing to show for it. At best, they could point at something that wasnt supposed to exist; or, as Eury had found in her rather cruel method, that they could have gone into the wilderness. Without hesitation, he pulled off the blocker ring.

Oh, Im here, dear boy. Just give me a moment to access the situation. Definitely not the approach I would have taken, but then again, Im used to it.

Helpful advice only, Nil. Im under a bit of pressure.

Well, all the advice I could give you is that you indeed appear to be in the wilderness. To be honest, I wasnt aware of the tunnels myself, but I can see the logic. One thing I think youre wrong about is

the discovery of the ruins. I dont think they were discovered while buildings were being constructed. I think the city was built here to take advantage of the fact. Just consider the noble districts. It was assumed that they hired hunters to get the stones for their homes from ruins in the wilderness. That is, in fact, quite true now. But what about when the city was established? All that valuable material lying around. Stones that were almost indestructible and had no guardians, not to mention the items that could have been found within. Like, say, the world sword?

Something clicked in Dallions mind. Several things, in fact.

The backer who gave the sword for exploration was the Lord Mayor?

Send my troops and build a military camp.

Quite right. And that camp would eventually turn into a thriving city. But is that all?

The question made Dallion think. He knew that the answer was obvious, but no matter how hard he tried he couldnt come up with anything that felt right.

Dallions eyes widened with surprise.

Most definitely

An interesting possibility, dont you think?

Chapter 376: Guard of the Keys

Dal? Euryale asked. Everything alright?

Yeah, Dallion replied, even if he didnt sound like it was. Only now did he come to realize how large and complicated the real world really was, and so much of it seemed to be linked to this city; not Nerosal, but the one before it. If Nils reasoning was correct, the Archduke of the province was also involved, as were the Academy, the Emperor, and possibly some foreign powers as well. I was just thinking about something.

Dont keep us in suspense, the gorgon said.

Did any of you spot any living creatures since we got down here?

One, Vend said.

A few, Eury added.

That was much more than Dallion had managed to see. Still, it meant two things: that there werent any dangerous predators, and more importanthe could try out his new skill on them. According to the rectangles description, Zoology was also supposed to allow Dallion to communicate with creatures as well, and if there was anyone who would know the layout beneath the city, it was them.

The crackling mewed sadly. Being a dagger guardian didnt help when it came to the real world, at least not the wilderness.

Can you catch any? Dallion pressed on.

It was expected that Vend would be able to do something of the sort with his speed and splitting capability, but the man just shook his head. In contrast, Euryale just sighed.

How much do you need? she asked.

A few, Dallion said, uncertain what answer she wanted to hear. Whatever's easiest.

Several of the snakes twitched, after which the gorgon disappeared in the darkness of the tunnels.

Don't you need any light? Dallion shouted behind her.

Gorgons don't need much light, Vend said. They don't need any light. They also don't like being lied to.

I know. Dallion deliberately avoided feigning ignorance. There was a time when he actually believed that a quick defense would be believable. That was ten leveling-up trials ago. Now he could see how gullible he had been.

It took fifteen minutes for Euryale to return with a handful of rats. When Dallion saw them, he immediately understood how she had managed to do so easily what Vend couldn't. It wasn't a matter of speed or reactions; it was a matter of abilities. The rats that she had brought were no longer alive in the normal sense of the word—they had been transformed into statues.

Take your pick, Euryale said, holding ex-rodents in front of him in both hands.

A person's normal reaction would have been to feel at least a small amount of fear or disgust at the sight of petrified creatures. Instead, Dallion found it rather impressive.

Taking one gently, he then held it right, pressing the end of the kaleidervisto on its head. Knowing what was expected of him, Lux's flame grew brighter.

Barbecued granite? Vend asked, somewhat intrigued by what Dallion was doing.

Healing fire, Dallion explained. Apparently petrification is a condition.

Before everyone's eyes, the rat statue changed color. Slowly the gray tones faded away, replaced by a dirty brown. Soon enough, the creature was breathing once more. To everyone's surprise, though, it didn't try to escape Dallion's grip, or even bite him. One could almost assume that it was a specially trained pet or familiar.

The creature didn't react. It seemed that mind-talking was reserved for guardians.

I'll let you go, now, Dallion said. The rat squiggled around so as to look at him. Its fine. Dallion smiled, adding some calm to his words as he spoke. Just don't run away, okay?

Gently he placed the creature on the stone floor. The rat remained there, sniffing the air, uncertain what to do.

Have you felt any chainlings while you were down here?

Once again, there was no reaction. Dallion could feel that the creature wanted to help, but just couldn't understand what was asked from him. Apparently, communication methods weren't the same as understanding. Given the way skills worked, most likely Dallion was going to have to increase his Zoology level before he could lead a proper conversation. Regardless, he could still rely on his music skills.

Have you seen this? Dallion drew his Nox dagger.

Upon seeing the weapons edge, the rat squeaked in terror. Dallion could feel fear overwhelm it, rendering it unable even to run away. Instantly, Dallion put the weapon away. There was only one thing in this world that would make a rat have such a reaction to a crackling: a similar type of Star-spawn, or namely a chainling.

Where is it? Dallion asked, infusing the words with a desire for help.

The rat started running down one of the tunnels, but then stopped and went back towards Dallion. Fear fought with eagerness, neither emerging as the clear winner.

Lead me to where it is, Dallion said again, adding a hint of bravery. There's no need to worry. I'll be right behind you.

There was a moment more of hesitation, but in the end, the bravery tipped the scales, causing the rat to move forward.

Sometimes watching you reminds me how scary you can become, Vend said. How did you do that?

The miracle of mid-level music, Dallion lied. It'll take us where the nearest ring is.

What do we do with the rest of them? Euryale was still holding the rest of the rat statues.

Take them along. I'll restore them later.

That wasn't the answer that the gorgon wanted to hear. Still, she wasn't in the mood to have arguments with Dallion, so she shoved them in a few of her pouches and followed.

The walking continued for quite a while. Dallion stopped trying to keep track of which tunnels they took, relying on Euryale's memory and perception ability. As a hunter and a gorgon, she probably was used to this sort of thing. It wouldn't have come as a surprise if she had gone through similar situations out in the wilderness when exploring other ruins.

After turning round another corner, Dallion and everyone else suddenly saw a faint light in the distance.

The blue flame coming from the kaleidervisto went out. This made the light ahead even more visible. From this distance, it seemed to faint as candlelight. The rat, meanwhile, sensing the vibes change, scurried away in the opposite direction of the light.

Do you think it's one of the guards? Dallion whispered, so that only awakened in the vicinity would hear.

Guards don't have a reason to remain quiet, Euryale whispered back and put on her combat gauntlets. Before she could take a step forward, however, Vend made a sign for her to stay put.

I'll go, he said, then burst into instances.

Concentrating on his focus, Dallion was able to see a dozen instances of the elite move forward, each following a different path. Every few steps the instances would fade away, then emerge again, like the inside of a combustion engine. Once all instances were a safe distance away, Dallion and Euryale followed suit.

The tunnel from where the source of the light was coming from led to a small side chamber, which continued to a larger hall further down. Vend was already by the hall entrance by the time Dallion

and Eury caught up. There was another case of combat splitting, after which the elite held his hand up, indicating that the rest of the trio approached quietly.

Whats there? Dallion whispered once he got next to Vend.

Remember when you said that the rat will lead us to the Vermillion ring? The ring is not alone.

That made Dallion concerned. Splitting into five instances, he peeked in the chamber with four of them to get a better look. The chamber was much different from what Dallion expected. Unlike the rest of the tunnels they had gone through, there were clear signs that at some point in the past this had belonged to a magnificent building. Statues of crystal, though partially covered with dust, displayed scenes of majesty and glory. The unusual thing was that unlike most statues Dallion had seen so far, these werent humanoid by any stretch of the imagination, but statues of slime creatures in various states of being. In some cases, they were small and roundish, in others they were stretched up like twisted strands of jelly, always adorned with unique jewels and pieces of armor. It was little wonder that the majority of artifacts that Dallion had to explore had such strange shapesmost of them werent made to be used by humans. One of the slime statues even had a kaleidervisto half-way in its head, like a sort of slime monocle.

Amid the hall of statues, next to a dimly lit lantern, a guard leaned against a column of blue marble. He had the appearance of a standard city guard, but Dallion couldnt sense any emotions in him. Splitting into another set of instances, Dallion looked at the man through his kaleidervisto. The guard changed into a black silhouette.

Its a chainling, Dallion whispered. In a guards uniform.

Not good, Vend said. Its time to go back. We cant take something like that alone.

As much as Dallion wanted to try out his spark ability in real life, he tended to agree. Even he could see that the risk was huge. On the other hand, things werent going to get better. Right now, they had the element of surprise. If they were to wait and tell anyone what they found, apart from getting into serious trouble, they risked tipping off another hidden cultist.

Ill take him, Euryale said. Just be sure to stay behind me.

If you say so, Vend said in untypically passively-aggressive fashion.

Just stay nearby and make sure he doesnt do anything unexpected. Ill petrify him. After that the gorgon paused. Well see what well do after that.

When do we go? Dallion asked.

Now. Euryale replied and dashed forward.

Like phantoms, the trio entered the chamber, moving so fast that a double digit wouldnt even register them. Even Dallion was able to keep up with the other two. To a side observer, it would have seemed like they changed location in the blink of the eye. The chainling, though, was no ordinary observer. The moment they crossed the threshold, it stepped away from the column, ready to face them. There were no weapons in its handsthe chainling didnt need them, instead transforming its hands into ten-inch shard covered claws.

Nice trick, Euryale said and opened her eyes. Behind her, Vend and Dallion stood ready. Dallion had already drawn his whip blade, ready to unleash Gleam, if it came to that. Vend had already entered his state of constant combat splitting, instances moving about, all of them careful not to step in front of the gorgon.

Faced with all that, the chainling calmly looked Euryale in the eyes and winced.

Uh-oh, Dallion thought. Apparently, there were creatures not susceptible to a gorgons gaze.

Chapter 377: Spooks in Ruins

All four people simultaneously did a combat split. Instances of Dallion, Euryale, Vend, and the chainling filled the chamber, moving in dozens of different ways. Dallion was doing his best to concentrate, but he was having significant trouble keeping up. Thanks to the latest expeditions, and his leveling up, he was able to keep track of everyones motions, but lacked the speed to match them. To make things worse, the chainling wasnt using any weapons, but its own deformed hands, which made Dallions empathic ability useless in the current fight.

The whip blade extended, swirling at the enemy in spiral fashion. If nothing else, the shardfly was just as fast as Vend and Euryale, managing even to score a few hits. The damage, sadly, was insignificant. No sooner had the weapon fragments torn through the chainlings leg than black ooze emerged, closing the wound as if nothing had happened.

One of the chainlings arms shot forward like a jet of ink, flying directly in the direction of Dallions head. Desperately Dallion tried to twist back in an attempt to escape the attack, but he knew that it was already too late. Feet before the black goo hit him in the chest, Euryale emerged, positioning herself between the threat and Dallion. Almost at the same time, three instances of Vend had managed to make it behind the chainling and were in the process of slicing its arm off from the shoulder.

A loud clang followed, as Eury deflected the now loose arm, keeping Dallion safe.

Normally, Dallion would have thanked her for the save, but high-speed combat didnt allow for conversation. Words were slower than actions, and could always wait until the end of the battle. Rather, Dallion split again, several of his instances leaping to the side as he attempted another attack.

The whip blade twisted mid-air. Arching, it went to the side of the chainling, then made a sharp turn, aiming directly for the neck. Ooze emerged from the creatures body, forming a shield to protect against the blow. To the chainlings and Dallions surprise, the shield didnt stop the attack. Instead, the tip and the following three segments suddenly disappeared and reappeared again in the chainlings neck, after having swirled past the shield of goo.

A blood freezing shriek filled the hall, accompanied by a smell that Dallion could only describe as burned rubber. Instinctively, he pulled back the whip blade, the weapon snapping back into its compact form.

The moment she said it, Dallion knew exactly what she had done. Throughout the battle the front three segments at least the ones that everyone has seen were never real. They were merely an illusion created by the shardfly, while the real segments had been rendered completely invisible, following a different trajectory. Quite ingenious, not to mention terrifying. If Dallion were to come across a creature such as Gleam in the wilderness, even on her present level, he wasn't sure whether he could win.

Daggers filled the air as Vend threw them at the chainling in rapid succession. It was said that ranged weapons weren't useful since they were easy to avoid using combat splitting. That didn't hold true when the one throwing them was a splitting master, however. Each time the chainling attempted to split, its attempt would be put to an abrupt end as the dagger hitting it caused all other instances to fade away. That didn't stop the creature from trying over and over again, despite the result being the same. Looking from the side, it was almost as if the chainling was stuck in a loop it couldn't complete. Like a broken record, it reached one point, only to skip back to the beginning, and while it struggled, Euryale managed to move close enough to commence a multi attack in real life.

Dallion had seen multi attacks many times in the realms. On several occasions he had performed them himself. However, never had he witnessed what the gorgon was doing now.

The gorgon's fists moved so fast that it almost looked as if they didn't. However, if one concentrated enough, they would see the blurs of tens of other fists continuing up to her elbow. The chainling's guard clothes and breastplate were quickly pulverized to bits. Flesh shifted, turning into black crystal. That didn't stop Eury from punching on into its chest. Then, suddenly, the creature burst into black goo.

Curiosity made Dallion lean forward to get a better look. Vend pulled him back and to the side, so as not to.

Careful, the elite said now that the battle was over. You don't want to get any of that stuff on you.

The first moment Dallion felt relief, the next the feeling was replaced by fear, urging him to rush to Euryale. Vend stopped him.

Calm, the elite whispered. Stay calm.

But"

She'll be fine. Eury's different. Chainlings don't affect her.

Looking at the gorgon, it seemed quite true. The black liquid that was on her hands was dropping off, as if she were made of glass.

It might surprise you, dear boy, I don't hold all the answers of the universe.

Dallion grumbled mentally. The echo's response would have been deep if Dallion hadn't heard it used before multiple times. Clearly, Dallion didn't know much about gorgons. After this was over, Dallion planned to ask her.

It's safe, Eury said. She was crouching on the ground, examining what was left of the chainling's clothes. Sergeant's uniform, she added. Those aren't too easy to get.

I guess only someone important would have been let down here. Once Vend let Dallion go, he approached Euryale. At this point, the black liquid had lost its darkness, turning transparent. Is that all it would take?

Normally, no. Euryale examined the entirety of the floor with the snakes on her head. But with a tournament going on, everyones attention would have been occupied with something else. If they had timed it with the countess grand arrival, he could easily have sneaked here using the official way. Either that, or he had corrupted one of the arena guards whod let him in. The question is why, though.

Ill go see if theres anything special about the lantern, Dallion said, quickly going to the object. He was aware how stupid that sounded, though being the one carrying a kaleidervisto gave him a certain degree of leniency.

The guard was a spook?

Everyones a spook. The only reason I know theyre there is because I know I cant move on my own.

Dallion trembled at the thought. The explanation made sense in a creepy sort of way. It was natural for items to consider people with blocking items ghosts. From their perspective, they wouldnt be able to sense, feel, or see the person, even if they were held. That meant that everyone who had gone to the ruins was equipped with blocking items. The question was why, though.

An eternity ago.

That wasnt overly helpful.

Yeah, they do that a lot.

Dallion sighed. While the lantern had provided some interesting information, he wasnt of any realm help.

Nothing special here, Dallion said. Any sign of a ring?

Yes, Euryale replied. But it doesnt look like well be taking it.

Curious, Dallion turned around. Soon enough, he saw exactly what she had in mind. A Vermillion ring was placed on the pedestal of a statue. However, the weirdness didnt end there the ring was within the crystal statue itself, as if it had always belonged there.

Not sure how theyd have done that, Vend said.

First, Im an echo and as such cannot have any items. Second, one doesnt have to own a specific item to know the math of the situation. I gather that with your gift, you could even convince the guardian of the statue to hand it over to you. On second thought, maybe that isnt the best idea. Theres no telling where the statues have been.

Thats not too unusual in the wilderness, dear boy. You really need to tone down things from time to time.

For the next fifteen minutes the hall was searched to the last detail. Given that a chainling had been left as a guard, there was bound to be something important. After all that work, however, nothing

else out of the ordinary was found. By all indications the only thing of importance was the Vermillion ring placed in the statue.

Nothing, Euryale said.

At least we found the ring, Vend said. We can take it, if you want, but that wont help much. We already know theres at least one more.

For all we know, there might be rings all over the city, Dallion added. I learned that they had several before they involved me. I still dont get why hes stashing them here. I mean, I get that its a difficult place to reach, but if he wants to summon a chainling, why not just do it directly at the first opportunity?

Because theres something to be gained by waiting.

With one strike, Euryale shattered the statue to bits. Shards scattered everywhere, though that wasnt enough to free the Vermillion ring. Determined to get it, Eury hit the remaining chunks of crystal with her gauntlets a few more times.

One ring was at the performers plaza, the gorgon continued, as she finally took the item from among the crystal. We know that at least one cultist was at the arena. Im willing to bet that the thing that stands above us is the city palace. The rest are probably placed beneath the big five guilds and the city guard forts.

Why do you think that? Dallion was trying to see the big picture, but there were a few things that didnt fit.

All are places with large gatherings of awakened. The Star doesnt just want to kill the countess. He wants to get rid of as many awakened as possible. Eury put the ring away in her pouch.

So, hes not summoning a single chainling, hes summoning a pack of them. Vend nodded. Havent seen that before.

I have, Euryale said. For the first time since hed known her, Dallion felt such a degree of terror emanating from her, only matched by her determination. And I wont let it happen here. Grab the lantern. Were not leaving these ruins until we can find the rest of the rings.

Chapter 378: Land of Nerosal

The rest of the day was spent roaming the underground ruins. Despite multiple examples of copyette architecture, all of the tunnels and chambers had been picked clean of anything of value. With the exceptions of several statue chambers and a few pits too deep to explore, there wasnt a single item of interest. The only living creatures were rats and insects, and the only echoes and guardiansthose that the group had brought in.

Dallion used his Zoology skill on animals any opportunity he got, but even so all that the trio managed to find were a total of two more Vermilions Tears rings. In each case, the rings were lacking guardians, simply left within various copyette statues. Normally, that would have been a cause for celebration. However, none thought they had done a particularly good job. For one thing, the ring at Performers Plaza wasnt among the found. That begged the question how many others they had missed.

I think weve found all we could find, Vend said. We can continue later.

Do you have anything urgent to do? Euryale snapped at him.

An uneasy tension appeared. Dallion could feel that the gorgon was more on edge than normal, and for some reason he didnt think it was only because of the Star threat.

No, Vend said in an annoyingly calm fashion. He does. He pointed at Dallion. Also, so do you. The tournament will start in an hour. That means that the overseer will be in the stands. Werent you going to tell her about all this?

The gorgons snakes moved all about.

Dont do that, Eury said, pointing a finger at Vends face as she did. I hate it. Then, without another word, she turned around and continued along the tunnel, holding the lantern.

Dallion didnt immediately follow.

Whats that about? he whispered, quietly enough to make sure that Eury couldnt hear him.

The usual, Vend whispered back. She doesnt like leaving things half done. Thats what makes her a good hunter, and so difficult to be with. You have other things to worry about, though. Youre close to the final round.

Who said anything about winning? Youve reached the flashy rounds. From here on, its all about the spectacle. While youre on the field, thousands will watch your every move, including cultists. If they see you acting any differently, what do you think theyll do?

In that case, Ill just surrender.

Youre not listening to me. Youve reached a stage at which you cant surrender. Regardless of your reason, the countess will lose face, and more than you suspect. This is more than a blemish on her festival. The imperial has found you amusing enough to wager on you since the second round. If a member of the imperial family loses due to your unexplained surrender, who do you think will be blamed?

This was precisely why Dallion disliked politics and intrigue. There were too many spoken and unspoken rules to keep in mind, not to mention all the latest gossip, family relations, acquaintances and whatnot. Fighting and leveling up was a lot easier or at least, a lot less bothersome.

How do you know? Dallion asked.

Lady Marigold told me.

That explained a lot. Dallion could see the old noble bragging how much she had won off him, or complaining about how much she had lost, respectively.

Alright, then. Ill do my best to put on a good show.

Do your best not to get hurt, Vend said sharply. With a mage present, there will be no mercy. Your next opponent will do their best to hurt you as badly as possible. Only the regulars are left at this point, and they dont like surprises. Not to mention there are those who want to earn a few points in the Archdukes good book. Being the one who punished the one who defeated a member of the Archdukes family will earn them a lot.

Besides, Eury will be upset if anything happened to you. Lets go. Shell be mad if we keep her waiting.

You seem to know a lot about her, Dallion noted.

Id hope so. We were an item a year ago.

The sentence couldnt have been more shocking if Vend had tried. All of a sudden Dallion felt like an idiot. He had all those abilities, skills available to only a handful of people in the world, and yet he had failed to see something so obvious. To make matters worse, no one had told him, not even made a hint. Or maybe they had, but Dallion was busy worrying about something, like he usually did.

I would have preferred to have known.

I strongly doubt that. But even if you had, what would have happened? At best, a quite awkward situation, considering how many flaws you used to have before reaching your current level. In any event, thats something to worry about after the festival is over.

Good to know your priorities arent messed up

It took half an hour to reach the arenas entry spot. Unlike before, Eury had insisted that they use the proper entrance. Vend tried to argue a bit, but ultimately gave in. Unlike the entrance: beneath the stairway, the entrance was a lot cleaner and well organized. Also, it was much better guarded, even if they were on the wrong side of the door after all, their goal was to prevent people from going in, not getting out. Having someone known from the inside and then turn out to be Nerosals only gorgon created quite a stir among the guards. For a moment, Dallion feared that Eury would resort to petrifying them, but it quickly became apparent that she could create a similar effect.

In the past, Dallion had always suspected that Eury played a more important part in the city than she claimed. Having city guard lieutenants and captains visit her shop as often as they did was enough to give him such an impression. However, even he didnt suspect that she was answerable directly to the overseer herself.

A few words were enough for Dallion to be ushered up to the arena main floor and directly to his own waiting room. There was a whole table full of food, most of which Dallion hadnt seen in his life. However, eating was the last thing on his mind right now.

Three Vermilion rings four if counting the one they had failed to retrieve. How had the Star managed to find so many? And after finding them, why had he just left them in the ruins beneath the city? Something didnt feel right.

There was a brief knock on the door, after which an elegantly dressed woman entered.

The tournament will start in ten minutes, she said with a polite bow. Your grid position is seven.

Thanks. Dallion smiled. I would have checked the tournament ring in a bit.

No need for apologies, sir. Challengers of your rank dont need to occupy themselves with such trivial matters. We are to inform you of any events in person. The woman took a few steps toward him. Your ring, if you please.

Dallion looked at his hand. Only now did he notice that he had started to amass quite a few rings of his own. He pulled off the one he had received from the tournament organizers and gave it to the woman.

Thank you. Is there anything you would require before the spectacle?

No. Dallion was about to turn around when he changed his mind. Actually, yes. Id like to see the field before the fight. Can I do that?

Of course, the woman replied, not in the least bit surprised. It is natural for first timers to want to see the field. Please, follow me.

Ten feet before the field, the woman stopped. Arena rules forbade her from being seen by the crowd. It was all for the audience from here on. As a rising star, Dallion was expected to make a solo appearance, so he decided to take full advantage and even do something somewhat unexpected.

Stopping five feet from the exit, Dallion took the kaleidervisto from his holster boot and held it in front of his right eye. At this point, all his opponents knew that trick, so revealing it wasnt such a big deal.

The moment Dallion came into view, cheers filled the arena. The stands roared in acknowledgement to the challenger, who had reached this far on his first go. The atmosphere was electrifying, making Dallion wave back despite his initial reluctance. For a moment, he understood what MMA fighters felt when they made their way to the ring.

All the nobles had gathered, filling their section of the arena. Dallions imperial fan was leaning forward, eager to see his champion, much to the annoyance of the mage behind. On the next balcony, the countess remained as calm and majestic as always, waiting for the precise moment to mark the start of the round.

Thankfully, the overseer was too busy to pay attention, engaged in a conversation with Euryale. There was no mistake what the conversation was about. Dallion watched as the gorgon took a leather pouch from her belt no doubt the one containing the Vermilion rings and handed it over the overseer. As the pouch passed over the stone fence between them, a new black silhouette appeared. The difference was that the silhouette wasnt caused by a person, but part of the arena itself.

No! Dallion shouted, but it was already too late. Tendrils shot up from the stone, entangling the pouch, as well as the overseers hand.

AREA AWAKENING

A green rectangle emerged in front of Dallion, pulling him into the realms. More alarming, though, was the fact that green rectangles had appeared above everyones head, like a layer of green glass above the entire arena stand.

You are in the land of NEROSAL

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.

Help the overseer! Dallion shouted. Unlike everyone else, his new ability allowed him to see what everyone but two others could not that the overseer was none other but the citys guardian.

You're really come a long way, a familiar voice said next to Dallion. I'd almost call it commendable, if it wasn't pointless.

Dallion's whip blade moved on its own accord, extending so as to hit the being that had just appeared. Inches before hitting its target, however, an unknown force made it stop mid-air.

Arthurows, Dallion said, fighting to suppress the fear inside of him.

Been a while, Dal. The Star smiled. Unlike all the previous times, he was dressed in a simple pair of black jeans and t-shirt with the word Star written in front. Congrats on your new skills, by the way. Must have been difficult to get them. Envy the size of melons formed within Arthurows body. Not that it matters. They won't lift a finger to help her. The star pointed at the overseer.

Groups of city guards had joined the nobles in the area to fight against the formed chainlings. However, all of them were protecting the countess and the imperial guest. Other than Euryale, not a single one was doing anything to assist the overseer.

She's strong, but soon she'll fall, and they won't even notice.

This was your plan? Dallion asked. To take over the city?

Destroy it, the Star said with glee. Oh, I'll leave a few survivors enough to spread the word of what happened here. You'll be among the survivors, of course. Least I can do for a fellow Earther.

Before the firebird could do anything, an ink-black cloud appeared above Dallion.

I wouldn't, the Star said. As he did, eyes and mouths appeared all over the cloud's surface. It'll be impolite to run off. Not after they're about to get the spectacle they deserve.

Chapter 379: Guardian Challenge

A sphere of light surrounded part of the nobles section. The mage had cast a barrier of some sort, holding off the chainlings that were attempting to attack the imperial. Judging by his power, the mage could probably take a dozen chainlings alone, even wild ones. However, his focus was to protect one person and one alone. Meanwhile, the nobles were doing a pretty good job themselves, slashing down chainlings with the ease an awakened would defeat a rather strong guardian. However, for every chainling that was destroyed, three more seemed to appear, most continuing to focus their attention on the overseer.

They are just pups, the Star told Dallion. But there's a few hundred of them. In fact, there's just enough to let the people have the illusion of hope. It's much more entertaining that way, the Star winked.

You're destroying a city just for fun? Dallion asked, the thought making him physically sick.

Feeling unwell? The Star laughed. Too much empathy tends to do that. And yes, it's partially for fun. You've only been here a year, so you've no idea how boring things get. Still, I'm not the one to blame. Arthurows begged for this. Even before I got involved, he was seeking out ways to join the cult and obtain power. He had one wish. Well, that's a lie. He had a lot, but it all boiled down to one: make the nobles pay. In a way, they were the cause of their own downfall.

The explanation sounded reasonable. One could see how the Star was acting as divine punishment. After all, they too watched awakened fight each other for amusement. However, beneath the apparent logic was a layer of lies Dallion could see all too well thanks to his music skills.

You dont believe a word Im saying, do you? Arthurows said, amused. Thatll be really interesting. Watching you grow further will be exciting.

That, too, was a lie. Dallion could feel the hatred oozing from the Stars new form. The only reason he hadnt attacked him was, most likely, because of the Green Moon. Dallion might have lost his favored status, but he was still a Moon follower. That meant that there still were options.

Why the keys? Dallion asked. If your plan was to attack the city guardian all along, what did you need them for?

As stupid as ever. The Star Smirked. Its not entirely your fault. Everyone else thought the same thing. Tell someone youre searching for a key to open gates between realms, and they think youll summon a horde of monsters. Such a lack of imagination. The wilderness is full of monsters.

Dallion tensed up. He knew where this was going. Most of all, he was annoyed at himself for not seeing the possibility.

All I needed to do was pull the city into the wilderness. Where do you think the chainlings are coming from?

You used the Vermilions tears to get the chainlings in the citys realm, Dallion said. Thats why there was no one protecting most of them.

Well done. The Star clapped. The rings were just the portal. If the nobles of this city had any common sense, they would have destroyed the ruins they erected the city on ages ago. However, theres always that element of greed. What if there are more artifacts to be found? And trust me, there are. There are so many places beneath Nerosal that arent explored, not to mention the surrounding area. Even after it was destroyed, the Slime Capital was a thing of marvel and beauty. However, because of that, it still provides cracks that could be used to move people between the realms and the real world.

Line strikes whooshed in the air, several dozen feet above Dallions head. March had joined the fight, along with other guild members. The sudden influx of reinforcements bumped up the peoples strength, but even Dallion could see it was temporary. All the awakened in the city wouldnt withstand the waves of chainlings. In fact, he wasnt sure that anything could.

Oh, and dont blame yourself. You werent the one responsible for all this. At least not directly. It helped that you showed those idiots in the mirror pool how to level up a Vermilion, but you werent the only one to succeed.

I can still stop you, Dallion said.

Oh? The Star smiled widely. A dog-like chainling nearby growled, but Arthurows gave it a sign to remain quiet. This should be good. Tell me.

A single crackling against my chainlings? The Stars face twisted in disappointment. I expected something better than this. Please tell me thats not all.

The crackling appeared, landing on the ground a foot away. It didnt hiss or make any aggressive actions, but rather stared at the Star dead on.

Seriously? Arthurows sighed. Whats he going to do? Purr at me?

Whos the one lacking imagination now? Dallion asked. Now that he had an idea of the powers he was going to face, he felt very afraid, but even so he had the determination to see this through. Nox isnt going to do anything to you, he went on. Hes going to challenge the area guardian.

The Stars smile suddenly vanished. He too had realized what Dallions plan was. There was one single way to strengthen the guardian and at the same time to eject everyone out of the realm and back into the real world: defeat the overseer. Any other time that would be an impossible task, but given how weakened the overseer had become as a result of the constant chainling attack, he stood a chance.

Fetch! the Star shouted.

Instantly, the dog chainling leapt in Nox direction. Before it could get anywhere close, however, another entity appeared on the field. The entity had the same features as Dallion. In fact, any onlooker would have mistaken it for an echo of his. That was no echo, however. Rather, it was something far stronger that had been hitchhiking a ride on Dallion for several days now.

I never doubted youd do something like this, the copyette said. It was reckless, stupid, and Im thankful to you for it.

Dallion instinctively glanced at his belt. The crystal dagger he was wearing was still there, but now it seemed hollow, like a bottle of alcohol that had its cap removed for too long.

The Moons wont like it if you intervene. The Star said, his voice gaining a slight tremble.

Only in the real world. The copyette-Dallion smiled. But we arent there, are we? You saw to that. Go ahead, Dal, Aspan said to Dallion. You know the drill. Ill take care of things here. You follow that crazy gut of yours.

Blades emerged from the copyette like spikes from water. Several chainlings had gathered nearby, but neither of them, nor the Star itself, dared attack.

GUARDIAN CHALLENGE!

Nox has challenged the guardian of Nerosol on your behalf!

The guardian has no choice but to respond to the challenge.

A whirlwind of black tentacles exploded in the arena stands, destroying half of the nobles sector. Debris and chainlings were scattered about like twigs. Not awakened, though. Since this was a realm, defeating them here merely meant they were returned to the real world, to wait for the resolution like the average person.

The entire whip blade disappeared.

COMBAT INITIATED

Thats the thing about cities, dear boy. They make sure that leadership transfers is done quickly.

Does that mean that if I win, Ill become in charge of

Green markers surrounded Dallion. It had been quite a while since he had seen whose appear. On the instant he split into fifteen instances, each following one of the provided defense skill options.

Spear-tipped tendrils hit every single option. In all instances Dallion was hit, although, thankfully in a few of those, the tendril merely hit the armadil shield.

The attacks continued. Even all the way from the arena stands, the overseer was able to cause him such difficulty. The armada shield and invisible whip blade moved about, assisting as much as they could, which proved barely enough. If it wasn't for the scores of chainlings still set on attacking the overseer, Dallion would have been ejected from the realm already. Quite ironic that they were instrumental in giving him a chance to get rid of them.

More awakened arrived at the arena. Most of them were far more skilled than Dallion, but still focused on the wrong things. Everyone seemed obsessed with protecting the countess and the top nobles, even if they were among the strongest entities there. In contrast, only the remaining city guards were trying to assist the overseer. That was the problem with secrets—sometimes they were so well kept that no one could see things for what they really were.

Meanwhile, the fight between the Star and the copyette was heating up. None of the two used weapons in that fight, the entities themselves were weapons capable of more destruction than everyone else combines. Tendrils clashed against one another in a high-speed tactical fight that blasted holes in the ground and any chainling unfortunate enough to get caught in the crossfire. Some of the tendrils even pierced the body of the enemy, causing a red rectangle or two to appear above them. That only presented a minor inconvenience, since in all cases the beings' health was restored just as quickly as it was decreased. In the real world neither would be capable of such a feat. Here, though, their power was close to limitless.

Dallion! Euryale shouted! Get out of here!

It was a heartfelt, tempting offer, but Dallion didn't even consider it. There simply was too much at stake.

I'll worry about that. You worry about getting me there in one piece.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has decreased by 15%

Two red rectangles appeared, as one of the overseer tendrils pierced Dallion through the right shoulder, then twisted like a hook and pierced him again from the back.

Dallion attempted to slice the tendril off with his harpsisword, but the weapon bounced right off, as if it were hitting steel.

Of the ten instances, in nine, nothing occurred. In the tenth, however, his weapon suddenly became surrounded by a bright white flame. That was the spark he was hoping to trigger. Once again, Dallion struck the tentacle. This time, the harpsisword sliced through, cutting it off. A red rectangle appeared, although the health decrease was exceedingly low. Still, it was a start.

Lux propelled Dallion forward, taking advantage of the missing tendril. Others tried to hit Dallion, but all were easily avoided far too easily.

Lux pull back! Dallion shouted, aware he had entered a trap. Sadly, it was too late. The overseer had already used her previous tendrils' attacks to create a spider web around him, before attacking directly with a whole cluster. At this range, even if Dallion managed to avoid half the tendrils, it would even be enough to get his health to zero.

Dal! Euryale shouted. Look at me!

Instinct made Dallion do just that. A split second later, he saw that her eyes were open.

Chapter 380: Flesh of Stone

Grayness, numbness, cold those were the sensations Dallion went through as his body transformed to stone. Being a gorgons boyfriend, he had occasionally wondered what it would be like to be petrified. It was very different from what he thought. The process was fast, but also considerably slow, almost like watching water freeze in a puddle. All sensations vanished away, as did the concept of color. The world around was transformed into shades of gray. Most unexpected of all, there was no fear or panic, just the realization of what was going on.

Reality around him didnt stop. The overseers tendrils continued forward, only to bounce off the statue like arrows off a shield.

Lux propelled the statue backwards out of the overseers reach. Since Dallion was an object, the firebird didnt have to worry about maintaining a bearable speed.

Not close enough, if thats your idea. Besides, I have a feeling she can see me at least in part.

What if you work together with Lux? We cant win in a direct battle against her, so we have to be clever and rely on others, both friends and enemies.

The shardfly snorted. She didnt find the concept at all pleasant, but knowing Dallion well enough by now, she had to agree.

Dallion concentrated. However, no matter how hard he tried, he simply couldnt combat split. Apparently, one needed to move in order to have options. Still, he had seen many workarounds in this world, so he attempted something else. Instead of performing actions, he focused on the one thing his new state allowed him to do: communicate with his familiars.

Concentrating on combat splitting again, Dallion gave two distinct orders to the firebird. Initially, nothing happened. In a few moments, however, he experienced the first sensation since Eury had petrified him: a faint itch in his eyes. The more he pushed on, the itchier his eyes became, until finally, two instances were created: in one the firebird moved him left, and in the other right. Everything considered, that was good enough, at least it was going to give him a slight edge.

The chainling cub meowed in annoyed fashion, then disappeared, only to reappear, leaping out from the dagger. Nox heard the sound of claws scratching as his familiar climbed up onto him.

The cat meowed, content. In a way, it was like back in the old days, when Dallion was new to the city and the crackling was a mere level one. So much had changed since then, and yet so much had remained the same.

In a flash, the statue disappeared, only to reappear behind one of the chainlings who was attempting to fight Aspan. Once there, Dallion combat split into five instances. His eyes were itching him like crazy, but no tears could come out.

Nothing happened.

Immediately, Dallion chose that instance to be reality. A split second later the invisible whip blade split the air, impaling the chainling in the process. A terrifying scream filled the air, merging with the many other sounds of the battlefield.

The destruction was almost instant. Affected by the spark attack, the black silhouette popped like a balloon, fragments evaporating all around.

TERMINAL STRIKE!

Dealt Damage is increased by 1000%

Dallion didnt say a word. The petrification process had numbed his feelings to the point that euphoria couldnt take hold. This was indeed a success, but in the grand scheme of things it was equivalent to completing a tutorial. The real fight was yet to start.

On cue, the firebird propelled the statue above the overseer. Just as he was about to fly to an even closer location, a cluster of tendrils shot from the womans body, hitting Dallion in the chest, shoving him away in the process.

PETRIFICATION EFFECT REDUCED by 25%

Splitting four instances, Dallion had Lux propel him away again, then immediately near the overseer, from all four cardinal directions. The effect was no different. In each case, a cluster of tendrils would emerge and shove him away. There were no red rectangles, fortunately, although this time Dallion felt the slightest amount of pressure each time the tendrils hit his chest.

That made her twice Dallions current level, not to mention she had unique abilities far better than his. The one thing she clearly didnt have, though, was out of the box thinking.

Good as always, but not against her. I might fool her for a moment, but thats all, and its a big if.

Are you willing to gamble on that?

As much as he tried to appear calm, even he had to admit it was more reckless than anything he had done before. The only difference was that this time, Dallion had a well thought out plan. It relied on the overseer getting confused, of course. However, as long as he combined several layers of deception, there was a chance she would miss something.

There was one minor difference in the instructions given: each instance was at a slightly different location. Once again, Dallion disappeared, only to appear again ten feet from the overseer, floating in the air. Five times four Noxes, disguised as Dallion, moved forward merging illusion and instances in one. That was the beauty of Dallions plan. He knew that the overseer could see layers, he also knew that she could see illusions, but merged together she had to deal with sixty possible attackers an easy feat as long as she was mentally prepared. As it turned out, she wasnt.

Tendrils shot in all directions, though less certain than before. In nearly all the cases, they managed to hit Dallion, and the illusions respectively, in the chest same as before. However, there were two cases in which that didnt occur, at least not entirely. While Dallion himself was still hit, one of Noxs copies managed to evade the cluster of tendrils, shredding them with his claws. That was the opening Dallion was hoping for.

A faint shimmering appeared around him. Then Gleam took action. The whip blade extended, though not forward; it flew to the side, darting to the spot at which the successful Nox had been, then made a ninety-degree turn, going along the corridor the crackling had created.

For once, the overseer had no time to react, leaving the blade to pierce her through the neck.

TERMINAL STRIKE!

Dealt Damage is increased by 1000%

There was no shriek or scream. In an instant, all tendrils, as well as Dallions other instances, disappeared. It was as if time itself had stopped. Dallion could feel himself stuck within the moment, watching as everything and everyone else remained perfectly still. Then, a new rectangle appeared.

PETRIFICATION EFFECT REDUCED by 25%

Good work. The overseer turned around and took a step forward.

No, dear child, you didnt fail, the overseer said. The fight is over, but I have powers in this realm. After all, just as Im not purely a chainling, Im not just an area guardian either. Even after all this time, part of me remains human.

Patches of her dress fell off as she walked, like wet tissue paper, revealing what was underneath. At first Dallion thought that the new clothes were the standard adventurers outfit, but as more of it came into view, he saw that it was some kind of military uniform.

I suppose I shouldnt be surprised. I hoped it would never come to this, that you would remain a carefree adventurer, exploring items and serving tables at the Gremlins Timepiece. For a while, I even hoped that youd find love.

Half of the veil fell off, revealing the face of a young woman one that he had seen twice before, all in the awakening realms.

Youre really too much like your grandfather. The overseer smiled. And despite my efforts, I failed to keep you from walking in his footsteps. I guess he and my brother failed as well.

In a way, I am. As I said, I'm no longer fully human. During the war, someone had to willingly sacrifice part of themselves to become what you see now: a monster that would win the war. Your grandfather wanted to use himself, but I didn't let him. Even after everything that happened, I still loved him. So, I made the sacrifice, instead.

Dallion felt his stomach churn. Even semi-petrified, the thought of what she had gone through was painful. Dallion himself had only had a glimpse of what it was like to be enveloped in void good, courtesy of the Star. To have her do it willingly and go through the entire process

Always curious? The overseer laughed. You know the rules. I cannot tell you that, not yet.

More laws of the Moons?

They are what protects us. They are what protect you. There are still things you're not ready for yet, but the way you're going, you will be. Just like your grandfather was.

NEROSAL level increased

NEROSAL has been improved to SECOND COUNTY CAPITAL

Were out of time, the overseer said. Her body had already started turning into dust particles that faded in the air. Thank you for letting me see you, and for bringing Veil and Gloria. I hope you do well.

You have broken through your twenty-seventh barrier.

Choose the focus you value the most.