

Leveling up 541

Chapter 541: Exchange of Secrets

The day that Dallion was supposed to stay in the city of towers turned into two, then five. It wasn't something he and Eury had planned. It started by doing small tasks: hunting, crafting, building. As confidence in Dallion and Eury grew, the tasks became more complicated.

Questions still remained regarding the dryads, but it seemed that the decision to follow the Star had been made seven generations ago. In fact, the choice had been made so that the people had a chance to survive. According to the few dryad scrolls that Dallion had been given, the plague predated the Star's recent arrival by millennia, going all the way back when the dryads first entered the realm. When communication with the sword marshal of the realm ceased, people feared that the war for dominance wasn't going as well as expected. The local inhabitants had reasoned that if the war was lost, they would be killed, so the fighting had to be still going on. It was at that time that they had come to a decision: to prepare for the day that they would be needed in battle.

The dryad chosen to rule the realm came up with an idea so controversial that it needed to be decided by all the awakened present. According to him, the only way to proceed was to ensure that only the strong remained.

The scrolls were unclear exactly how it happened, but the proposal was accepted. The following year the ruler used his herbology skills to make every plant in the realm sap the strength of non-awakened, thus ensuring that only awakened were allowed to roam the land. Since no one was willing to kill the non-awakened outright, they were to remain in the towns and cities under the protection of the awakened and deal with all non-essential tasks such as cleaning, cooking, and crafting. In short, a servant class had been created. Then something went wrong.

The original plague was supposed to be slow and cumulative, allowing non-awakened dryads to live to their thirties before it started crippling them. However, as it soon turned out, not anyone was willing to sentence their family to a short death. The awakened rebelled, starting revolts or outright fleeing. Cities splintered into fractions and fell. In some cases, the non-awakened went against awakened, ignoring the rules. An endless period of chaos followed in which people died young and only the guardians were able to provide safety.

That was until the Star's appearance. Entering the realm, the Star taught the survivors to build towers of stone and live according to the rules of survival. No longer were they to rely on the guardians for protection, but could live a full and long life.

It was sad that they couldn't see the irony of the situation: that by listening to the Star, they had made a copy of the events that had brought to the chaos in the first place. Dallion, however, was able to see all too well. The only reason that no further fighting had erupted was because the surviving population, at least in this part of the realm, was too small for it. Despite the massive towers and the size of the city, there were merely a few hundred dryads living in the towers. They were being provided for by twenty-one awakened, all of which used echoes and technology granted to them by the star for hunting.

At least they're stable, Nil said while Dallion finished making another rocket shooter. He had offered to make normal weapons, such as dartbows, or even crossbows, but no one seemed to be interested.

Given that the weapons they were currently using were old, created centuries ago, Dallion decided to create them despite his reservations.

At least you enhanced your skills a bit, Nil said, as Dallion wiped the sweat off his forehead.

Thanks, Nil.

That wasn't the reason he and Eury had stayed, though. The gorgon had suggested, and rightfully so, that any information regarding the guardians and the second part of the realm would be quite valuable. Leading to anything useful, though, was going to take a considerable amount of time. Even with Dallion constantly using his music skills in every conversation, the dryads remained distrustful. It was only lately that they had started sharing relevant information and only as long as it wasn't related to the city itself.

You finished another one? a dryad asked from the entrance of the forge. Dallion could tell that it was, in fact, an echo.

I can teach you, if you want.

No, that's the job for the non-awakened. We give them food and they give us everything else. That's how it's always been.

Always was an exaggeration, but Dallion knew what the other meant. There was no point in arguing he had attempted several times in the past and it had always ended in the same fashion.

Why won't you teach us how to fight? the dryad asked.

You don't want me to.

We do.

You know my price. Give us maps and information about the realm and we'll teach you some new fighting techniques that you can achieve at your level.

The echo remained quiet.

Look, I know that there's an awakening altar in the city, Dallion said. There's no other way for you to have reached your current level otherwise. I'm not interested in that. I just want to know what lies onwards.

There's nothing onwards.

Now, I know you're lying. There are supposed to be nine guardian temples. I've found the remains of three so far. That means there should be six more. Just tell me where they are and whether they are protected. That's all I'm asking.

Why are you so interested in the world? You're strong. You don't need to be here.

You got that right, Dallion thought. While he wanted to see the world's twin-crown, he would have preferred to be able to return back to the real world. There was every chance that the first ruler had taken the skill gem in order to create the plague. The second gem wasn't of any particular value to Dallion, although if he

happened to come across it he'd gladly give it to Eury. Zoology went well with being a hunter, regardless if they were breaking apart or not.

If were so strong, why are you being so protective? Dallion turned around, looking the echo straight in the eyes. You know we wont stay here. Does it matter if we know more about the world?

If you know more, you might try to convince others to join you.

Those were the words of the current ruler. Although the place had fewer people than Dallions village of birth, the old titles remained. The rulesironically a non-awakenedwas in fact running everything from within the towers. He was very much against any information sharing. Dallion had no idea why. The only reason he could think of was that some secret orders must have been handed down by the Star during his last appearance.

I really dont know why were having this conversation, Dallion went to the forge and filled it with firewood. We never get anywhere. Lets just

Teach me how to line attack and Ill tell you what you want to know.

This was unexpected. Dallion stopped whatever he was doing and looked at the echo. There didnt seem to be any apparent sign of him lying. Clusters of determination were visible throughout the dryads entire body, almost as abundant as his ambition.

Somehow I dont think hes received the rulers permission, Dallion said.

Its normal for ambition to appear upon meeting someone considerably stronger, Nil remarked. You yourself were impressed by March and Dame Vesuvia at the time.

I never wanted to become a ruler.

Give it time, dear boy. Give it time.

Just line attacks? Dallion asked. Nothing more.

Line attacks will be enough, the dryad lied. Dallion could see him want to learn more, but also didnt want to overlay his hand.

Do I teach just you or everyone? Dallion asked. As expected, there was hesitation in the other. I need to know to set my price, Dallion explained.

Me and one more. In exchange, Ill give you an original map of the realm. A lot has changed since then, but not the landscape. The locations of all the old cities are on it, as well as the original temples. Itll help you find what youre looking for.

Dallion shook his head.

Here. The echo took out a piece of parchment from the back of his belt and unfolded it. This is the part up to here. Take this. That way you can see Im telling the truth.

The map seemed genuine, but Dallion was going to have to look at it in greater detail to be sure. Hed also need Eurys assistance. Being the one constantly going out on hunts, she had a much better idea of the realm than him.

Lets say I agree. How will this work?

You can create echoes, right? We dont keep track of our echoes. Ill take you to a place where no one else is watching. There, youll teach us how to do line attacks.

Maybe you havent seen line attacks in practice, but thats not exactly something that you can keep secret. The ones I make can slice through small mountains. Eurys are even stronger.

The place Ill take you two is underground. Itll be able to withstand a dozen line attacks at least. And even if it doesnt, all itll do is bury echoes.

Youve thought of everything.

It was almost as if the dryad had been planning this for a very long time. That was impossible, of course. There was no way he could know Dallion and Eury would be banished here. However, there was one other possibility. If the guardians of this world were still alive, they too would have the knowledge to teach him such skills. Maybe that was why the ruler was so afraid of people running off? Without the awakened to provide food for them, the local inhabitants would perish.

Ill need to check with Eury first, but I think it can be arranged. He took the map piece. If we decide to do it, our echoes will be waiting for yours at midnight and the spot you attacked us.

Done what it had come to do, the echo blinked out of existence. Dallion waited a bit longer, then folded up the map and got back to work. By evening, Eury returned along with the hunting party.

The catch consisted mostly of fish, although the gorgon had managed to add some meat to the menu. Looking at the creature, however, it wasnt something Dallion felt comfortable eating. There was something about the cross between a cat and a caterpillar that made his stomach churn at the thought.

As the dryads lifted up the meetup to the inhabitants of the towers, Dallion pulled Eury aside and told her the offer.

What do you think? he asked. Theres no guarantee well get anything, but its better than anything else theyve given us so far. At least its not some ancient history scroll.

Its either a test, or the only chance wed get. Either way, we should go for it. If its a test, itll hardly be the first. Ive been watching them. Everything is based on a strict hierarchy of loyalty. The awakened are only allowed to learn as much as they need to bring food and protect the city. Everything else is discouraged.

I got that impression as well. Dallion nodded. The map isnt something they should have. The only thing Im not sure is whether they have the whole of it, or just this piece.

It doesnt matter.

Dallion tilted his head, surprised. What was she seeing that he hadnt?

If there wasnt anyone else in the realm, why would the awakened be tasked with protecting the city? she asked, tapping Dallion on the forehead with a finger. While teaching him line attack, well also find out who he intends to use it on.

Chapter 542: Dryad Reality

Its still weird not seeing the Moons, Dallion said, looking up at the sky. All the stars are there, but no moons.

Eury said nothing. They had been waiting for over an hour now and there still was no sign of the dryads they were supposed to be training. No one knew whether they had gotten cold feet or something had happened to dissuade them.

Sitting on the ground a few steps away, Eury was carefully examining the map fragment. All the landmarks were where they were supposed to be, proving that it was real. Of greater interest, though, were the markings of cities, temples, and less significant settlements. Back when the map had been valid, the realm must have been quite prosperous, bustling with life. Now, not even ruins remained.

Someone must have replaced the temples with stone circles, Eury said. It would explain the starting location.

We didnt come across any others, Dallion noted.

Thats because we didnt pass anywhere near. When we get the other part of the map, well check the next location. That will let us know one way or the other.

It was nice that she said when, although Dallion wasnt too sure. Strictly speaking, neither the map nor the potential information that the dryads might provide was of vital importance. The pair could continue on just as they had before, relying on their own senses. Still, obtaining some knowledge was going to save them time and effort, and sometimes that was all one could hope for.

Another ten minutes passed without anyone showing up. Dallion was just about to call it a night when two dryads finally emerged. None of them were carrying any weapons.

Everything okay? Dallion asked the moment they got near. I was afraid you werent going to show up.

We had to be careful, the male dryad said. Without going into detail. Did you decide to train us?

Were here, right? Dallion smirked. But before that, I want to see you have the other part of the map.

On cue, the female dryad took out a folded piece of parchment. Judging by the size, it was what was promised.

Well give it to you on the training grounds.

In that case, lead the way.

The next fifteen minutes were spent sprinting through forests and plains, occasionally changing directions for no reason. Despite Euryales insistence that no one was following them, the dryads were extremely paranoid, emanating fear all the way. It was only when they reached a small cave at the foot of the mountain that they calmed down.

Its there, the male dryad said, as he broke a few branches from a nearby tree.

Dallion suspected that the branches would be made into torches, though not that the process wouldnt involve fire. Each stick had a light crystal tied to it, which was then activated by a gentle tap.

Were there dwarves in the realm? Dallion asked as he was handed a torch.

No. The dryad looked at him, confused.

Light crystals are usually mined by dwarves.

Its a gift from the Star. They provide light inside the towers.

How come you got them, then?

Reluctance emanated from the dryad. Without answering, he walked faster into the cave.

His mother gave them to us, the female dryad said. Back when it was discovered, he was an awakened. She wanted a better life for him.

There were a few moments of silence. One could imagine what it must have been like. In this realm, learning that your child wasnt a cause for celebrationit meant having your child taken away, so it could ensure the citys survival.

When did he awaken? Eury asked.

When he was five. We awakened early, then are sent outside through the food baskets. Sometimes theres only a few of us, sometimes were in groups.

He must miss his parents, Dallion whispered.

The female dryad looked at him, sadness and gratitude filling her entire body like.

We dont remember our birth parents. After we leave the tower, we dont get to see them again. The awakened are our family now.

And yet you want to run away from your family. Is there something else I should know about? If they were okay with you learning these types of attacks, wed be teaching you outside the city walls. In any event, wed be teaching more than you two.

The dryad didnt answer.

The group continued for a while longer until they reached a large chamber. There, the male dryad took all the torches and spread them out along the walls. The amount of light wasnt much, but enough for an awakened to see everything.

Seal the tunnel, he told Dallion.

Are you sure? Dallion arched his brows. You wont be able to get out.

You have an idea where the cave is. Youll be able to find it with a bit of effort and get here to get your map.

What about you? Your echoes wont be able to tell you what you have learned.

We have our ways. The dryad nodded in the direction of the entrance. Block it up.

With a sign Dallion turned around and did a line attack. It was a lot narrower than what he usually did, just enough to cut off some chunks from the entrance ceiling, creating the impression that the tunnel was blocked. He hoped that would be enough, but the dryad asked him to repeat the attack a few more times. Only then did he take out the remaining part of the map and hand it to Eury.

Wow, they really had it on them, Dallion thought.

You're still too young to be this cynical, Nil said. I admit it's a healthy way to live, but don't take it too far.

It's not by choice, Nil.

Dear boy, it's never by choice.

The training was gradual, but fast. Eury took care of most of it, having Dallion assist with practical demonstrations. Even after being a teacher himself, he had to admit that the gorgon was far better in it, almost as if teaching was in her blood. The unfortunate thing was that Dallion knew firsthand how much Eury hated doing it. She had never given a reason, just brushed it away, saying that it wasn't her thing. Judging by the speed at which all of her students learned things, Dallion disagreed.

Be sure you're committed before you try, the gorgon said. The first time is exhausting. It's possible that you faint.

I won't faint, the dryad muttered.

Then, go for it.

Taking an audible breath, the male dryad adjusted his stance. Dallion could see all the mistakes he made when he first used the attack. Back then, he had expected the release of force to have a massive kick. Now he knew that there couldn't be. Only a person familiar with the functioning of firearms would have such thoughts.

With a yell, the dryad slashed the air with his wooden sickle. Everyone leaned forward to see the line of destruction hit the opposing wall of the chamber. Sadly, one never materialized. Annoyed, the dryad tried again, then again. Each slash was weaker than the last, making it clear that the moment had gone.

Stop, Eury said.

I can do it! The dryad ignored her. I just have to

Stop! she said sharply. This time, he opened. It's more than just strength. You need to be in the state of mind. What's the level of your body trait at?

Seven. The dryad looked away from her.

Seven? Dallion couldn't believe his ears. Even common double-digit awakened had improved their traits beyond ten. There was no mistake that the dryads were in their thirties. Why the heck do you have a seven?

Seven is a lot. The female dryad came to her friend's defense. Most are at five.

This changes a few things. Eury's snakes stirred. Your body needs to be close to twenty for you to manage that.

But you can still teach me? the dryad asked in desperation.

I've already taught you all there is to teach. Your own body won't allow you to go through with the attack. What are your traits?

As it turned out, the trait that the dryads predominantly improved was mind. It was the one needed to create echoes for hunting, thus regarded as the most important. Apparently, even getting an attack to seven had been done in secret. From a local point of view, the two dryads were twice as strong as capable as anyone else. In real terms, they were little more than children. That explained why they so much relied on projectile weapons not because they were strong, but because they were weak. It was clear that the original plan of creating a society of the strong had backfired in the most spectacular way, though not without the help of the Star.

You promised you'd teach us, the dryad muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

We're not Moons. We can't teach you beyond your limits.

Cursed Moons. There was spite and hatred in the dryad's voice.

I can't teach you line-attacks, but I can show you how to shatter rock, Eury said. Would that make up for it?

Everyone, Dallion included, stared at her.

You can do that?

It won't be easy. Your body trait needs to be at ten to do it properly, but there's a chance you can pull it off. It all depends on your will.

Teach us!

Alright. Just to warn you, you might break your hand if you fail at this. That means you'll have to come up with a good explanation.

The dryad said nothing.

We know you aren't echoes, Dallion joined in. In truth, it was more of an educated guess than certainty. If Dallion was able to summon his kaleidervisto to this realm, there would be no doubt, but as things stood, he had to rely on deductive reasoning. The sudden blossoming of fear within both dryads confirmed his suspicions.

So, do you want to go on with it? the gorgon asked.

The male dryad hesitated.

I will, the female dryad said. I'm a nine. She glanced at her friend. I'm a three at everything else, though. Everything except mind.

A nine is good. Come along.

The ability wasn't something Dallion knew, so he paid close attention as well. A few demonstrations were enough for him to grasp the concept, although the question why Eury hadn't taught him this before lingered on.

The skill is useless for your way of fighting, Ariel said from Dallion's realm. That's why she didn't teach you. You didn't teach her advanced combat splitting, either.

Dallion knew that his echo was right, but still couldn't get rid of the feeling. It wasn't just that she hadn't taught him a skill. Rather, it was the realization that even after so much time together, they

remained two separate people. They continued to be close, but even when they were lovers, everyone kept things hidden from the other. Some would say that was a healthy thing, but maybe it was the reason that things could never fully work out between them.

Now try it, Eury said.

Standing in front of the blocked off tunnel entrance, the dryad punched the large rock in front of her. The moment her fist made contact with the hard surface, a spiderweb of cracks formed on it. The strength wasn't enough to shatter it outright, but it was clearly visible that she was halfway there. Moments later the dryad's arm fell down to her side.

It's okay, Eury said. Your arm will feel numb the first few times. Keep on practicing and you'll get the hang of it. If you want to really do some damage, increase your body trait the next chance you get.

The dryad nodded.

Is that enough? The gorgon turned to the male dryad.

He nodded.

In that case, we're done. She went in front of the tunnel entrance and without warning did a point attack. The force released from her fist continued on, uncorking the tunnel with as little effort as if it was a wine bottle. Good luck with whatever you're planning to do. Let's go, Dal.

Wait! the female dryad shouted. There's something we haven't told you.

At those words, Dallion turned around. Euryale didn't have to.

One guardian remains, the dryad went on. The ruler says that most of them were killed, but that's not true. After we are cast out of the tower for the first time, the older awakened take us on a trip. For two days, we walk through the forest until we reach a small grove that's different from all the rest. Once there used to be a temple there, but now there's nothing. The guardian, however, remains.

A surprising turn of events, wouldn't you say? Nil asked. Observing the development of world domains is really fascinating. The Academy tried to get their clutches on world items for years, but even they haven't experienced a tenth of what you have. You should feel lucky, dear boy.

I should, should I? And yet, Dallion didn't.

He's the one who helps us level up to the point that we can do so on our own.

And he's not willing to teach you anything else? Dallion asked.

We asked him, the male dryad replied. But he keeps on saying that he doesn't want to get involved with the world. Leveling up is all he lets us do. That and talk, but we were warned not to listen. He might be nice, but he's still a Moon worshiper.

That was an interesting view of things. In this realm, the Star was seen as good, so all Moon worshipers were viewed as dangerous cultists. It was an exact mirror image of the real world, something the Star would enjoy. Maybe that's why he made it.

Be careful when you see him. He's dangerous and strong. Maybe stronger than you.

Well keep that in mind, Dallion said. Thanks.

Then, he and Eury entered the tunnel. Similar to the dryads, they too were not echoes.

Chapter 543: The Temple Grove

When the realm had first been populated, it must have had millions of inhabitants. There was no telling how many of those had been otherworlders, but the number had to have been significant. The map showed several large cities with several smaller ones. The population had been large and vibrant to the point that trade routes were also marked, forming a line from one end of the realm to the other, like one giant spine of the world. A lot had changed since then.

So far there had been one common element among world items: their inhabitants were not used to infinity. In the real world, millennia had passed since the fall of the dryads; here it was more like millions of years. Even with the powers of the awakened and the guardians preserving the realms as best they could, it was an impossible task, especially ifas Nil suggestedthe entire concept was flawed.

Shiny! Shiny! Shiny! The bird kept repeating.

It had the appearance of a large parrot, but its behavior was similar to the gulls that Dallion had encountered in the fallen south.

After you tell me what I need to know, Dallion closed his hand around the belt buckle. Without the ability to summon, he couldnt get any ingots or metal fragments to serve as currency. However, he still had his outfit. Are there any creatures in the sea?

Sea? Whats a sea? The parrot asked, confusion ballooning within him.

This here. Dallion tapped on the map.

The bird turned its head sideways to get a look.

The desert? Nothing but insects in the desert and only near the edges. Theres no water there. No one can cross it. Only eagles are strong enough to fly over.

That answered a few questions. It also suggested that the all port cities marked on the map probably were no more.

Do you know of any other towers? Like the ones back there?

Shiny first! The bird squawked and flapped its wings.

Seeing its patience diminishing, Dallion tossed the belt buckle at it. The creature flapped up, grabbing it with its feet. There was a time when Dallion would have had trouble fighting something as fast. Now, though, both knew what the outcome would be far before it started.

No towers. The parrot flew away.

Not the answer Dallion had hoped for. It didnt mean there werent any cities, though. After all, the city of towers had been the third largest city at the time the map was made. That suggested that two more might have survived to the present day as well.

What did it say? Euryale asked, eating some roasted meat on a stick.

The sea has become a desert. Also, there aren't any other towers in the realm.

Desert? I didn't expect that.

We haven't seen any snow in this place, so I guess there's some logic to it. Although that didn't explain where the water had vanished to. With realms being closed systems, it had to be here still, probably filling the abundant vegetation or deep beneath ground. I think

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion burst into instances. In several of them, he drew his sword, while the rest quickly spread out to determine where the threat was coming from. As he did, one of his instances got slashed out of existence.

WORLD CREATURE

Species: FUR SNAKE

Class: GLASS

Health: 100%

Traits: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- **Attack**
- **Defend**
- **Light Flash (Unique)**
- **Coil (Unique)**
- **Tail slash (Unique)**

A white rectangle emerged as Dallion got a better look at the creature.

Ill handle it, he said, dashing at it through the trees. Eury continued eating, not in the least concerned. She could defeat the creature with the wink of the eye. Dallion, though, strongly disliked facing this specific predator; it was vicious, fast, and could not be reasoned with to such a point that Dallion was unable to learn its language. At least it was alone and not in a pack.

Coiling around the trees like a furry cluster of optical fibers, the snake swung its tail at Dallion, aiming to slice his arm off. In one of his instances, it succeeded. Two more attempted to block the attack with the harpsisword only to have it coil around the weapon and pierce the Dallions neck.

That was the most annoying aspect of the creaturethe extreme flexibility allowing it to go around any obstacle as if it weren't there. Dallion often felt it was like fighting water, and if it wasn't for his proficiency in combat splitting, he would have been in serious trouble.

Focusing on its target, the snake let out a flash of light, blinding nearly all of Dallions instances, then propelled itself at him. This time, Dallion used his full combat splitting, pulling the creature in a reality in which it missed its target by a whisker.

The sharp tail passed by, shredding Dallions sleeve and causing a few harmless scars beneath. Dallion, however, was prepared, meeting it with his thread splitter.

Instinct caused the creature to try to coil around the blade of the weapon. Unfortunately for it, the blade had an edge that could cut through clouds. Several chunks of the snake fell off almost instantly.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 200%

Three red rectangles stacked up.

Pain caused the serpent to twist in agony and confusion. Dallion was quick to take advantage by partially splitting as he performed twenty different attacks.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

Like an old power cable, the snake had its life drain away, falling into pieces to the ground. Just to make sure, Dallion did another combat split, slicing up what was left of it. Then, checking his shoulder, he returned to Eury.

Youre getting better, the gorgon said. Just a scratch this time. Several of her snakes focused on his sleeve. Want me to take care of that for you?

Ill do it later, he replied. I need the practice.

The gorgon shrugged. In that case, lets keep going. Id like to reach the guardian before dark.

Sure. Thats what she had said the previous day. Sadly, the surprisingly high number of predator attacks had slowed them down by a day so far.

Dallions was still somewhat confused why that had happened. It was normal for creatures to attack those who ventured in their domain, but not when the power level was so obviously not in their favor. The first few, he could understand, but it seemed that more and more creatures of the same species were having a go. Part of him wondered whether that wasnt due to the guardian, but that didnt seem to be his style. Based on Dallions previous experience, dryad guardians liked to take part in their own fights. Maybe things were different here?

Walking through the forest continued. After another few hours, they were in the area where the map indicated the temple was supposed to be. Now all that was needed was for them to find the remains of the temple itself.

See anything? Dallion asked.

Nothing that has been disturbed. You?

Dallion concentrated. There didnt seem to be any emotions bleeding through the trees.

No. But I think I might know a way to get him to find us.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion split into a hundred instances. In all but one instance, Dallion drew his harpsisword and did a line attack, slicing through the forest as if it were grass. Hundreds of trees

fell down in unison, transforming the grove into a meadow of stumps. Then, when it was all over, Dallion reverted back to the single instance of him doing nothing and repeated the process. This time, fifty other instances emerged to stop him fifty instances of a dryad.

Did you really have to do this? one of the instances asked. Its painful to watch.

Immediately, Dallion stopped the combat splitting, causing all his extra instances to disappear. The guardian did the same. The only difference was that no dryads remained in the vicinity. Apparently, he had kept a few hidden.

A gorgon and a human, a deep voice said, coming from everywhere around. Never thought Id see that sight. But theres no telling what could have happened in the real world. I take it we didnt win?

Not exactly. Dallion looked around, trying to make out where the dryad was hiding. By the sound of it, he was using multiple echoes to talk to them.

You were banished, Eury said, getting straight to the point. Your entire race. All dryads are now nothing but guardians. Many have even gone feral.

Spoken like a typical gorgon. The guardian didnt sound overly pleased. However, after all this time, having a proper conversation, even with someone like you, is better than nothing.

A dryad walked out from behind the forest.

Just to let you know, Im an echo, he said. Just because I missed talking to someone doesnt mean Ive lost my sense of preservation.

Werent guardians supposed to be invincible? Dallion asked.

We both know that if it came to it, youd easily win. Isnt that right, initiates?

Up close the dryad seemed a lot less majestic than Dallion imagined. He wasnt old, nor feebly, just extremely ordinary. Dressed in brownish clothes of some rough fabric, he could pass as a trapper or even a herder.

So? The guardian leaned on a tree. Hows it out there?

Interesting. Dallion chose not to mention anything about the plague, the Star, or the ongoing fight with the rogue mage. Humans rule the world now.

Humans? The dryad sounded surprised. I was sure that the dwarves would have taken over. With their ability to make weapons, Id have thought theyd easily mop up all that was left after our attempt. Guess I was wrong. Did the Star find new allies?

Sort of, Dallion hesitated.

The Star hasnt been a concern for generations, Euryale interrupted. Its kingdom against kingdom now.

So there still isnt any grand empire? Maybe thats for the better. When emperors rise, they always try to do the same. And no matter how strong they are, the Star always manages to take advantage. I take it youre the new owners of the aura sword?

Were just an expedition, Eury lied again. And thats not why were here?

Spoken like a true ruler. All emotion vanished from the dryads expression. So, tell me. Why are you here?

We heard that there should be a temple here. Thats what were interested in. Not you.

I and my temple are one and the same. Why do you need it?

Euryale didnt reply. She could easily have gone on lying, but even she realized that wasnt going to get her anywhere. The guardian could well be weaker than either of them, but defeating him wouldnt bring them any closer to getting out of the realm.

Tell him, she told Dallion in her native language.

We need the temple to get out of here, Dallion said. Were not an expedition. We were banished here and are looking for a way out.

Banished in a realm? Thats something I hadnt seen in quite a while, not since our grand and powerful leader did it to all the otherworlders and their families. A small price to win the war, we were told. And a failsafe. You must be dealing with someone whos adept in magic. Maybe its better for you to remain here? A mage powerful enough to put you in here might be difficult to handle.

Well take our chances on the outside. If we stay here, well become like the dryads in the city of towers.

Yes, them. The guardian sighed. Not all of them are bad, but there are less and less bright ones with each generation. In a few thousand years Im not sure there will be any awakened at all.

So you see why we need to get to your temple?

Im sure you do. Sadly, you wont be the first not to get what you need or want.

Why not? Eury took a step towards him.

Because, your highness, it doesnt exist. Im all thats left.

Chapter 544: Maze of Illusion

What do you mean, its gone? Dallion asked.

As far as he was aware, guardian chambers and arenas were indestructible as long as the realm existed. The temples were the equivalent of just that. He could sort of understand that the temples of destroyed guardians not that he was fully sure how that would happen would vanish, but a temple of a living guardian to become destroyed that wasnt supposed to be possible.

Its not just buried somewhere beneath the ground or something?

No, its completely gone, the dryad replied, stepping away from the tree. Its not buried, hidden, or transformed into something else. Its gone.

How?

Magic doesnt follow the standard rules. When the Stars envoy came a few centuries ago, he didnt agree with what guardians were left. So, we were given a choice: surrender our temples or face him. I chose one way, others chose the other. At this point, theres no telling which was the right choice.

Dallion felt his heart sink. If there were no temples, that means there was no way of leaving this place. As far as he was concerned, he might as well die here. Maybe that was the way out? If so, it

was a matter of choice: remain in the realm or have the awakened powers sealed and return to the real world. Neither option was remotely appealing.

There arent any temples? Dallion found the strength to ask.

I dont know, the dryad replied. Its said that there has to be at least one for the sword to hold. However, it was also claimed that guardians cannot be killed. Not permanently, at least. As you saw, we can. Nine guardians were made the offer. Seven chose to oppose him and they ended up being gone. Make of that what you will.

Is that why youre hiding? Euryale asked.

Unlike Dallion, she didnt seem content with the explanation. There was no despair visible within her, just as there wasnt any doubt.

Youre afraid that if someone defeats you, youll die?

After an infinity of immortality, I cant risk it. If Im gone, whats left of the banished will soon follow. Theres far less of them every generation. Once every eight generations, theres an increase for some reason, but its not enough. Each generation has less awakened, and the ones who are blessed dont have anyone to train them how to use their powers. Without me, the city of towers will vanish in a generation.

As he said that, a thought crossed Dallions mind. Moments later, it turned into a realization that swept away his desperation.

Youre lying, Dallion said. I dont know how youre doing it, but youre lying. You might have helped the kids with a few examples, but you didnt make them fully awaken. Only a shrine can achieve that.

The dryad frowned.

Not a shrine, he corrected. I never said awakening alters didnt exist. At least one remained, and I used it to help them guide them along the path of awakening.

I want to see it.

Youre asking a lot.

I wont like to slice up the forest to find it, but I will. And if for some reason I dont, Eury will. Dallion glanced at the gorgon. Or do you think Im bluffing?

The silence indicated that the guardian didnt want to risk it. Orbs of reluctance formed within the echo as he walked slowly through the grove. Eury and Dallion followed. The trees seemed to change as they did. It was a slightly eerie feeling, but even Dallion could tell that it was an illusion. Curious, he reached out to touch one of the nearby trees, just to make sure it was there. His hand was grabbed by Eury well before his fingers were close to the bark.

Dont, the gorgon said. Thats how itll activate the trap.

Trap? Dallion pulled his hand back.

Maze snare, Eury explained. Its a maze made of illusion. They were used by the dryads back in their way. Those who dont know the right path are ensnared in the maze. The illusion is buried in

your mind and it takes months to fade away. Until then, you're stuck experiencing things that aren't there.

Nasty. How do you know about it?

There are still a few of them out there in the dryad ruins. I was part of a group that had to get some artifacts in one. It wasn't a pleasant experience. Jiroh ridiculed me for years afterwards. Of course, she was the one who saved me. Having an air cushion between you and everything else can be quite useful, especially in situations such as these.

The walking continued well into the night. However, despite the sky darkening, the light among the trees remained almost the same. In his mind, Dallion could picture the path they were taking. It was definitely a circular maze, though one that simultaneously had no and an infinite number of branches. At any point, Dallion could stop following the reluctant guide and walk in any direction. If he were to pass between two trees that he wasn't supposed to, the maze was going to ensnare him.

The maze of nightmares, Dallion thought.

There was a time when he would have jumped at the opportunity to face such a challenge. After having gone through hundreds of mending labyrinths, his fascination with them had faded significantly.

What will you do with the altar? the guardian asked. You can't use it to level up, and the Moons won't respond if you try to contact them through it.

I told you, Dallion replied. We're trying to get back to the real world.

The dryad didn't add anything, but Dallion could see clusters of disbelief form within him like grapes. Dallion himself had doubts. The situation he found himself in was completely new. The only ray of hope came from Nil, who was adamant that there always was a way out of a realm without anyone losing their awakening powers.

After an hour of walking, the group reached a small clearing that definitely hadn't been there before. The closest thing it reminded of was the arena of the altar itself. The echo made its way to the center of the clearing, where the familiar altar suddenly emerged, all covered in vines. Even in that state, it was still glowing in the seven lights of the Moons.

Here you are, the guardian said. Now what?

That was a good question. There was no guarantee that was the real altar and not another illusion meant to ensnare Dallion.

I'll check it out, Dallion whispered to Eury. If it doesn't work and something happens to me

It'll work. The gorgon remained as calm as ever, giving him a pat on the shoulder.

Yes, it will, Dallion told himself. If awakening had taught him something, it was that fears had a way of growing within one's awakening realm, to the point they affected the person in negative ways.

Reaching the altar, Dallion put his hand on the central crystal. The blue glow got brighter, but nothing else followed. That was a potentially good sign. Now, all he could hope was for it to work.

Do you think, Vermillion, Dallion said. Get me out of here.

Green rectangles stacked up in front of Dallion. The only issue was that all of them were empty. The environment remained unchanged. Moments later, the rectangles faded away one by one, until they were gone.

This wasn't what Dallion expected or hoped for. Concentrating, he tried again. The number of rectangles doubled, but the final result was the same. Dallion remained in the grove and the realm at large as if an invisible barrier were preventing him from making his escape.

Stop here, dear boy, Nil said before Dallion could try for a third time. If Vermillion hasn't managed by now, he just can't do it.

So, were stuck here? Dallion asked.

There's always a way out, dear boy. All you have to do is remain focused, determined, and make use of what you have in the best possible fashion.

One last time, Vermillion, Dallion said. Yet again, green rectangles filled the air only to vanish moments later. Whatever was blocking the island snake was capable of maintaining the seal between realms. That was most unfortunate, to say the least.

Told you, Nil sighed. Do you have to challenge every suggestion I make? Escape a realm either happens or it doesn't. It's not something that needs practice or preparation.

Just great

Still, look at the silver lining. What the experience has shown you is that you can establish a link to another realm. Maybe even your own.

Eury, Dallion said loudly. I'm going to try something. Whatever happens, don't freak out.

Several clusters of snakes on the gorgon's head stirred.

Ariel, get ready for an invasion. Dallion took a deep breath. Just in case.

Then he tried to establish a link to his own realm. Almost instantly, a hole opened in the ground. Weapons and equipment that Dallion had tried to summon days ago suddenly appeared all over him. And that was not all. Along with the shield and weapons, something else also shifted realm—something with a rather large wingspan.

Like a missile leaving a silo, Dark shot out of the hole, flying up into the sky. The dragon's size had almost doubled since Dallion had seen it last. Losing his dragonlet's chubbiness, the creature was a lot more athletic, covered entirely by a layer of dark sapphire scales. One could only guess what training harp had subjected him to, but it had had a clear result.

Finally! Dark said, making a series of loops in the air. It was getting cramped in there.

Dallion was just about to explain his relationship with the dragon, when he was suddenly slammed to the ground. Faster than his senses could perceive, the gorgon had made her way to him and was now standing over Dallion, filled with bloodlust.

Stay down, she said. Ill take care of this.

No! Dallion grabbed Eurys leg. Its alright.

A small cluster of snakes turned his direction.

I brought him here, Dallion added. I rescued him down south. Hes here to help.

The gorgon didnt seem entirely convinced, but she relaxed her posture.

I found him when I was on my last trip out south. Hes a follower of the Green Moon as well. Ive been teaching him how to fight for a while now. Dallion took a deep breath. Ive been keeping him in my realm since before we entered Linatol.

Upon saying that, he received exactly the reaction he thought he would. Eury didnt shout, argue, or even complain. Keeping a few dozen eyes on the dragon, she turned around and quietly helped Dallion back up.

I considered telling you, he went on. But it never was the right time.

I guess its the right time now.

Amused by the entire situation, Dark gilded closer to the ground, flying less than a dozen feet above Eury and Dallions heads. Seeing his mentor in an uncomfortable situation was enough to brighten the creatures day.

Dark, can you get rid of the illusion maze? Dallion shouted.

I can take care of that, Gleam said in her shardfly form. Releasing a trail of dust, she fluttered throughout the forest. On the surface, it seemed that the dust had no effect on the flora it touched. However, Dallion was confident that he wouldnt have to walk along an invisible maze again to get out of the grove.

The dryads gone, Eury said. The guardian must have ended his echo.

Might as well leave him. Hes not a threat. And besides, he cant help us. The altar isnt the way out.

And youre sure that there is a way out?

Nil is convinced there is. We just need to find it.

And how will we do that?

We have to find the other guardian. Dallion checked to make sure that all his gear was on him. Remember, he told us that seven refused the mages deal. That means theres one guardian left somewhere. Find him, and we find our way out.

Or so Dallion hoped.

Chapter 545: Missing Remains

So, youre his girlfriend? Dark asked.

One of the negatives of having a dragon in ones realm was that the dragon had access to a lot of information, not to mention that it, like Dallion, was an empath.

Something like that, Eury replied. Maybe because it was the only entity she could talk to, she found the dragon rather amusing.

Cool. Are you stronger?

Shes strong enough to beat you to a pulp if you dont start flying straight, Dallion interrupted.

Watching his trainee and hopefully still significant other discuss him wasnt the most comfortable experience. Now he understood how Vend must have felt at the time. The only difference was that Dallion didnt consider himself as annoying.

Dark snarled, then deliberately made two hoops in the air. The sad thing was that Dallion couldnt tell whether it was to annoy him, or to impress Euryale. Mostly likely it was both.

Having a dragon to fly with definitely presented an improvement to the standard mode of transportation. With Lux unable to manifest fully for some reason, Dark reduced the amount of time spent traversing the realm from weeks to hours. Already he was above the desert sea, which marked the mid-point of the realm. So far, there had been no trace of all the towns and settlements on the map. They hadnt come across any temples or other structures, either. The only hope remained the last major city in the hilt area.

What level are you? Dark asked.

You cant ask that. Dallion sighed.

Why not? The dragon sounded surprised. Im twenty-nine.

You need to keep your level and skills secret. Otherwise, opponents will use that against you. Im starting to sound like Nil again, Dallion thought.

Its alright. To Dallions surprise, the gorgon didnt seem to mind. Im seventy-two.

Dallion did his best to hide his surprise. It had been a while since they had discussed levels, but he distinctly remembered her not being that high. Similar to him, she had increased quite a lot levels recently far more than Dallion had. Clearly, her desire to rejoin the hunter guild wasnt a fancy made at the last moment. It was clear that Dallion was going to have to up his game and, in more senses than one.

Wow! Thats a lot! No wonder you can beat him up. Dark didnt miss a jab as his mentor. Maybe you should train me instead. I might actually learn something.

Guess Ill need to have a word with Harp, Dallion said in a low voice.

The dragon instantly tensed up. If there was one being he remained terrified of it was the nymph guardian.

Pleased with the result, Dallion split into instances to check the map.

The fifth temple should be on the other side of the sea, he said once back to normal. At least it used to be. Maybe well get lucky and he abruptly stopped. Eagles!

Everyone prepared for battle. Even this high up in the air, there were still creatures willing to fight. In this case, the culprits were massive eagles that rivaled Dark in size. Individually, they werent difficult to handle. However, they were quick to adapt and just as stubborn as the other predators in the world. It seemed that the plague had changed the fauna in exactly the same way, the dryad ruler

had hoped it would change the population. All non-awakened creatures had perished, some faster than others, leaving only awakened to roam the land. Even small critters like mice and rabbits were awakened at some level. As for the larger predators, they had developed egos and abilities reserved for one at the top of the food chain.

COMBAT INITIATED

Line attacks split the air, flying towards Dark and his passengers from a flock of eagles so far in the distance that they looked like dots in the sky.

Both Dallion and the dragon burst into instances. Dark used his acrobatic skills to fly safely from the attacks, while Dallion shadowed him, making sure to intervene only when the dragon messed up. Fortunately, there was no need to.

Passing through the cats cradle of destruction, Dark let out a cone of air aimed at the flock of enemies. To no surprise, it didnt hit any of its targets. The eagles easily evaded the air cone, not even going through the trouble to resort to combat splitting.

Youre too far away for ranged attacks, Dallion said in a harsh voice. Keep the element of surprise until you can actually do something with it.

The dragon snapped his tail like a whip. It was obvious that he felt embarrassed by being corrected in front of Eury.

A second groups trying to flank us, the gorgon said. I expect there might be one more hiding in the clouds.

Theyre using strategy? Dallion sounded surprised. Thats not something you see often.

You say that because you havent had to hunt shadow crows.

More line attacks descended upon the group, this time coming from two sides. To a hunter, this was a normal, be it slightly difficult attack. Anyone else watching, though, would get the feeling that they were observing a magic duel.

In his mind, Dallion played out a few strategies. If a third group was laying in wait, as Eury suggested, then the best approach was to continue the approach at the present speed. Any rash action would allow the new group to try and attack from Darks blind spot. However, with two people able to force split, maybe that wouldnt be the worst option.

Dark, pick up some speed! Dallion shouted. Were going towards the flock in front.

Got you! The dragon grinned and flapped its wings energetically.

Holding on, Dallion glanced at Eury. The gorgon remained calm, observing the entire situation with her snakes, almost as if she were assessing them. Given that she had volunteered him to take his hunters exam, maybe she was making sure he had what it took.

As the distance between Dark and the flock decreased, the eagles moved closer together. Then, when both sides were twenty feet apart, merged into one massive eagle. A strong torrent of wind hit Dallions group as the giant eagle flapped its wings.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion remained still. Almost on cue, the third flock emerged, letting several line attacks from behind.

Swoop down! Dallion ordered, though not before doing a point attack of his own.

The distance was far enough, so the eagle managed to break up into a flock once more without receiving any harm. However, in doing so, half of them got caught in the line attack coming from their own side.

TERMINAL DAMAGE

Damage dealt is increased by 1000%

Red rectangles appeared as several birds were reduced to clouds of feathers. Splitting into instances, Dark swooped back up and dealt with two more using his air torrent breath.

Gleam, Dallion said. Take care of the last one.

The shardfly didnt delay, flying to and through the nearest creature. The first thought Dallion had was that he was grateful that this was a realm. In the real world, he had seen shardflies slice through creatures and it seldom was a pretty sight.

One down, two to go, Dallion said.

To his surprise, none of the remaining two flocks followed. For several seconds, Dark flew about, expecting them to engage. Then, tired of waiting, the dragon turned around, set on taking the battle to them.

Theres no need for that, Eury said. Leave them. If they attack, then well deal with the situation.

But they started it! Dark grumbled.

They arent starting it any longer. Weve still a way to go to cross the desert. Youll have more chances to fight.

Dark wasnt pleased with the prospect, but still turned around. Just to be on the safe side, Dallion kept on splitting and looking behind for the next few minutes. As it turned out, Eury was right.

Why do you think they gave up? Dallion asked.

Theyre probably escalating it to the next level, the gorgon replied. Right now, theyre probably gathering all the eagles in the realm. Next time we fly back, there will be a swarm waiting for us.

It made sense, although Dallion was slightly alarmed at the rate the creatures were learning. As a hunter and former item clearer, he knew that everything adapted to the actions of the awakened. That was why during early expeditions, everyone used only basic skills, no matter how difficult it was. Here, the eagles had formed a strategy in a matter of hours.

Are shadow crows similar? Dallion asked.

Hopefully, youll never find out, the gorgon replied. Even Dark understood it was better to keep quiet.

The next few hours passed uneventfully. If there was an enemy in the distance, it would make sure to get out of the dragons path without engaging him. Boredom subtly crept in, and when it did Dallion

started thinking about things. First on the list was his level. Suddenly, sixty-one didn't seem all that much, not with Eury getting into the seventies. It wasn't so much that she had managed to get there; the gorgon had been a hunter decades before Dallion had awakened. The greater concern was that if it had taken her that long to barely pass the seventies, how long was it going to take him? Even with the recent setbacks, there was no denying that his rate of advancement was extremely fast, in part due to his empathy skills and familiars. At some point soon, though, he feared he might hit a wall.

Worrying is counterproductive, dear boy, Nil said. It only makes your task more difficult. And it's not like you don't have anything else to do.

Thanks, Nil, Dallion grumbled, then recited the names of the seven Moons.

One more temple gone, Eury noted.

Are you sure? Dallion asked.

The desert sea below was coming to an end, changing abruptly into wide plains full of grass and flowers. Looking from above, it seemed like an idyllic place. Yet, to a non-awakened it was like slow poison.

There was no sign of the temple at the coast or any large cities, for that matter. However, in the distance, Dallion managed to glimpse something familiar.

There's a city of towers, he said. Think we should check it out?

Euryale didn't reply.

They might know something.

If you want, she didn't sound convinced. Not with Dark, though. He might freak them out.

I can change into someone else, the dragon quickly said. I can change into a gorgon even.

Despite his looks he's pretty good at illusions, Dallion admitted. I think it'll be better if he keeps his form, though. Less people will be inclined to attack a dragon.

Alright. Just be careful.

A dozen instances of Dark flew to the city, landing on the tallest tower. In none of them was there any attack. In fact, in none was there any reaction at all.

Drawing his harpsword, Dallion prepared for an attack as he walked about the roof of the tower. But that didn't happen either. After a while, Dallion started noticing subtle signs that the place was abandoned: grass growing in the cracks, moss visible in parts of the walls, not to mention a complete silence only broken by the whistle of the wind.

Is anyone here? Dallion shouted in dryad. His words bounced off the towers with a slight echo, but nothing happened. Gleam, check the buildings on the ground. Dark, you fly about and keep an eye from the sky. We'll check the towers.

Why do you get to have fun? the dragon asked, but still flapped into the air.

It's hardly fun, Dallion thought.

Soon he was proven right.

The remains were on the eleventh floor of the main tower a pile of clothes in the center of what should have been a gathering hall. The entire floor was nothing but one big open space with partial walls depicting pictures of a glorious past: mighty rulers in heroic poses, the Star bringing its blessings from the sky, the city in its creation, the erection of the towers. At some point, the dryads must have believed that they were on the verge of achieving a utopia. Maybe they had died believing it as well. There was no sign of the bodies. Dallion had no idea how people form in this realm would die, but judging by the animals, they must have left bodies behind. The fact that he couldn't find them suggested that someone had done something to evaporate them, or put them to rest.

On the floor, carved with crude letters, was a phrase: the last thing someone must have written before giving up on life.

What does it say? Euryale asked.

We thank the Star, Dallion whispered. They probably died waiting for him.

In that case, it's better that they died before seeing how wrong they were.

It was a harsh thing to say, but Dallion saw her point.

Do you think the plague got them?

That or starvation. When there's no awakened to bring safe food, there's nothing they can do.

Maybe some managed to get out and reach another city? Dallion suggested.

Maybe, Eury said in a tone of voice that suggested that she didn't believe it.

We should bury them, Dallion said, moving away from the message on the floor.

There aren't any remains left to bury.

There's still the clothes.

It's pointless.

Maybe, but at least we can get a Moon to see what happened and do something about it.

Chapter 546: End of the Realm

Going through the deserted city brought nothing of interest. Everything of value was gone, probably taken by people who had themselves died centuries ago. All furniture and clothes were elegant, but simple. The only thing that remained were the depictions of the Star's glory, along with a few praying altars. If there was anything related to the Moons, it had been erased millennia ago.

Despite Dark's reluctance, it was decided that the group spend the night in the city. The roof of the tallest tower was chosen. Even so, the group took turns keeping watch. The serenity and beauty of the area didn't make it any less dangerous. As everyone had seen, the skies were also filled with predators.

You'll get out of this, Nil said as Dallion closed his eyes. Prisons only keep those who aren't strong enough from escaping. You and Eury are strong.

Im sure others have said that as well.

That was one of the things the former village chief had said before Dallion sealed away his powers. The old man claimed to have been imprisoned for centuries. The thought sent shivers down Dallions spine. At least here he wasnt alone.

How do you escape? Dallion asked.

Each prison is different, the echo replied. The most common method is to defeat the guardian, although that might be a bit tricky under the present circumstances. Finding a temple should work just as well, I think.

What if someones in an item without guardians? Dallion wondered.

Things are a bit more difficult there. Still, there are ways. I cant explain them, and in some cases you wont understand, but there always are ways. Just remember that.

Thanks, Nil.

The night passed slowly. Dallion woke up several times, each time having a nightmare. The stress of the current situation had built up to the point that his subconscious had to deal with it again. Thankfully, nothing in his realm seemed out of order.

Morning came without any attacks. Dark was the first to wake up, leaping into the sky for a quick look at the surrounding area. Eury, meanwhile, took considerably longer. Normally, she didnt sleep so much when in the wilderness. Maybe being trapped in a realm had an effect on her as well.

Managed to sleep? Dallion asked.

A bit. Ill sleep better once Im out of here.

She went through her backpack for something to eat. The food that the dryads had offered them wasnt terrible, but Eury, and Dallion for that matter, preferred meat to fruit.

Does Dark eat? Eury asked.

To be honest, Im not sure. Ive seen him go without eating for days. Hes made of magic, so maybe he doesnt?

Well need to get more food, even if he doesnt. She didnt say the silent part out loud, but Dallion sensed she thought theyd be staying in this realm longer than expected.

No. Dallion stood up. We wont be staying here that long.

The snakes on the gorgons head swirled in surprise. However, she said nothing. Ten minutes later, the group was on their way again.

The lands beneath them were full of vegetation, and the occasional animal, almost unchanged since the day the map was made. It was the dryad structures that were missing. Anytime they passed over a spot that had been marked as a settlement, there was nothing there.

By noon, only a quarter of the realm remained. This was the point at which Dallions view of things switched. So far, he had hoped that hell get to the end of the realm quickly. Now, he felt as if he didnt want it to end, as if having more would increase the chances of him finding something in it. Sadly, that didnt happen.

As nightfall approached, only a small sliver of realm remained the holt section.

You two've been quiet, Dark remarked. What's wrong?

Nothing is wrong, Dallion lied. We're just thinking about what we might face.

Does it matter? Everything we've fought so far was weak.

That wasn't precisely true, but Dallion decided not to argue. If, for whatever reason, they decided to go back, they'd have a tough time crossing the desert sea.

The strongest are always waiting at the end, Eury said. Have you noticed that there aren't any predators lately?

That's because they don't have anything to eat? Dark suggested, even if it was obvious that couldn't be the reason. There was just as much vegetation in this part of the realm as any. So, you think I should train a bit?

Better get some sleep. We'll need you to be at your full strength.

With a sound between a grumble and a whimper, the dragon moved away, then curled up on the ground.

The moment it did, Dallion drew his hapsisword, holding it like a mandolin. Taking a deep breath, he then started playing.

It's been a while since you just played, Eury said. I miss that.

Since I left Hannah, there haven't been many opportunities. Guess that's the problem with music. I keep thinking of it as a weapon.

The gorgon smiled.

Minutes stretched to hours. The dragon had fallen sound asleep, leaving Eury and Dallion to keep watch during the night. Unlike the large creature, none of them felt remotely tired. Knowing that tomorrow would mark the end of their journey had made them anxious. Whether they found a temple or not didn't particularly matter. Either way, their options would end: either they'd find a way to leave this prison, or they'd be trapped here for eternity.

The Night Auction, Eury said at one point. Why did you have to be there? Someone told you about it. There's no other way you'd have known.

I had a debt to pay, Dallion replied, still playing. I was hoping I'd get something from the auction, but it wasn't much.

Was it worth it?

It might be in the long run. Not now, though.

The gorgon's snakes stirred.

You still want to face the Star, she whispered. Don't you?

Yes. Dallion admitted. There were no more lies, no pretenses. It was no longer a matter of being ready to face him sooner or later. Rather, Dallion wanted to be the one who initiated the final battle.

In order to do that, though, he had to become stronger, as well as use anything that would give him an advantage, even if it was making another deal with the general.

You cant win against the Star, Eury said softly. Dallion could almost see the sadness in her words. People have tried for generations. Most end up becoming cultists. Hes lasted millennia. What do you have that everyone else didnt?

I dont know. I still want to put an end to it.

The rulers of three races tried. All of them ended up getting banished along with their entire race. You arent even a noble. She hesitated. You arent even a full hunter.

It doesnt have to be tomorrow. Dallion tried to make light of the situation. The only thing now is to get out of here and face the rogue mage. After that after that, well see what happens.

You always were reckless.

The night went on, filled with the sounds of Dallions harpsisword. Melody after melody, he kept ongoing, clearing his mind of past regrets, until finally he had nothing left to play. Done, he put the weapon away and waited. Once he did, Eury sat next to him, joining him in silence.

The crack of dawn came with the yawn of a dragon. Stretching his wings, Dark split into a dozen instances, so he could yawn leisurely in each, then walked slowly to the pair who were waiting for him. Even he could tell this was going to be a fundamental day, so he avoided making jokes or asking questions. The creature let the Dallion and Eury climb onto its back, then rose up into the air.

No one bothered to look at the map during the last leg of the trip there was no point. All everyone was hoping for was a temple to become visible down below. And to Dallions relief and surprise, they soon came across it. The single structure stood calmly in the middle of a meadow atop a small hill. Much larger than the temples, in the other words, it resembled a large cathedral created by a combination of wood and stone. Yes, that wasnt the only thing Dallion was able to see. Dots of intense emotion were scattered all about.

Stop! Dallion ordered, causing the dragon to circle back.

Why? Did you sense anything?

Yes, Dallion replied. A lot of fear.

Eury put on her combat gauntlets. As any hunter she knew that fear was the most dangerous thing to come across out of all emotions it killed the most.

Get ready to cocoon me if needed, Dallion told his armadil shield. You be on guard as well, Gleam.

Better stay behind, Dark, Eury said. Things might get a bit rough.

I can help, the dragon protested. Im strong.

You arent strong enough, the gorgon said.

Try not to overreact, dear boy, Nil said, as Dallion drew his harpsisword.

Dallion promptly ignored him. A hundred feet from the temple, his suspicions came true. Over a dozen dryads emerged from within the structure. All of them were armed with wooden sickles and makeshift wooden armor. It was obvious that they hadn't fought a day in their lives, but even if they had, it wouldn't matter. All the dryads, to the last one, were non-awakened.

Roots burst up from the ground, creating a fence between the dryads and Dallion. It was a clear indication that the guardian was near, although it seemed he was more interested in stopping the dryads wandering off than anything else.

They're just kids, Eury noted.

It's been a while since otherworlders came to visit, a deep voice said. Dallion could tell it was the guardian, but looking around, he could see no trace of him. Have you come to make an offer as well?

No offer, Dallion replied. We want to leave the realm. All we need is to enter your temple. After that

No, the guardian interrupted. You won't set foot inside.

We don't want to fight you, Eury said. Or your dryads.

Dallion steadied his breathing. It would be so easy for him to do a line attack. The guardian no doubt had the strength to stop it, but it would allow Eury to go on the offensive. Was that the right strategy, though? They were supposed to be far stronger than the guardian. Surely, it could see that. And yet, it behaved as if it held the advantage. There was something else at play here, and Dallion had no idea what.

If you won't let us in, at least come out and talk to us. Dallion decided to take that approach. We can discuss things, at least, he added agreement into his words.

Whether or not his music skills had an effect remained unclear, but the result was obvious. A short dryad, three quarters the height of the rest, made its way past the small crowd. The fence of roots broke up, giving way for it to pass. There was no doubt about it. This was the guardian of the temple. Despite his small stature, there was an increasing strength emanating from him. If Dallion had expected to face someone in the mid-forties, he was very much mistaken. This guardian was his level at the very least.

Human, gorgon, and dragon, the guardian said with a mocking smirk. You must have done quite a mess to end up banished here. Did the Star cast you in?

Not exactly, Dallion replied. A rogue mage serving him.

What do you want?

I told you. All we want is

To get out of here. I know that's what you said. I'm not asking you that. You must want something from me, otherwise you won't be here. So I'm asking again. What exactly do you want?

We want access to your temple's altar, Dallion said. I'm hoping that would be enough to create a link to the real world and let us escape. Also, I want to see the twi-crown.

The twi-crown? The guardian froze for a moment. Several seconds later, though, he burst out laughing. After all this time, someone has decided to show interest in the twi-crown? That's definitely a first. How do you know it's here?

Weve been in a few other world swords. We know about the crowns and the marshals.

A good story, but not enough to let me take you inside.

What else do you want? Eury asked.

You got it all wrong. Its not what I want, its what youre willing to offer. You can have the crown. At this point, its useless. To get past me, though, you have to offer something Id be interested in. If you dont, this is as far as you go.

Chapter 547: The Last Guardian

Having a guardian make demands wasnt new. The same had happened in each of the other world swords Dallion had visited. However, this time, something felt off.

What do you want? Dallion asked. I didnt see any cracklings in the realm.

Cracklings. The dryad let out a sad laugh. The realm doesnt allow for cracklings, thanks to our first ruler.

Dallion glanced at Eury. Judging by the movement of her snakes, she seemed as surprised as he was.

Is it possible? Dallion asked.

Thats difficult to say, dear boy, Nil replied. In theory, it should be. There are indestructible items, after all. However, the sword clearly isnt one of them. In theory, it should be possible. Scholars have pondered on the topic for centuries. Some attempts were even made, but outside of the Order, nothing seems to have worked.

Of course, he never foresaw what it would lead to, the guardian continued. The sad thing is that neither did we.

He made a backward wave with his hand. On cue, the gathered dryads turned around, heading back into the temple. When only the guardian was left, the fence of roots went back into the ground, as if it had never existed.

The sword king knew that wed be stuck in this realm for a very long time. He believed that cracklings and rustlings would be our greatest problemsomething that eventually we wouldnt be able to overcome. He sought advice from the many otherworlders here. After a while a solution was reached, or what was believed to be the solution: if the realm itself drained the strength of the cracklings, there would be no need for dryads to constantly roam the realm in constant search of abominations. Every single plant was transformed so as to sap the strength of any starspawn. It wasnt meant to be a quick process, but it ensured that anything that appeared would be unable to become a threat.

Thats why this realm is so pristine, Dallion noted. Youve never seen a crackling.

It was a good thing that Nox remained safely away in Dallions realm. Even as Dallions familiar, there was no telling how the flora would have affected him.

There have been a few now and again. Since they were harmless, people took them in as pets. Very vicious, untrainable pets, but you know how it is. As long as something is rare, those with means try to acquire it merely because they could.

What went wrong? Euryale asked the question.

That's the whole point. Nothing went wrong. The plants did exactly what they were supposed to do. However, what is a non-awakened but someone being a step away from a starspawn? Slowly, it turned out that the plants were draining the power of everything that wasn't awakened.

That's not what the scrolls in the other city said, Dallion noted.

Birchdale? The guardian let out a snort of disapproval. History can be rewritten, especially when people don't see a way out. Do you know what the city's currently called? Not that there are enough people to remember even that.

Dallion shook his head.

Starlight. I'd find the irony amusing if things weren't so desperate.

For several seconds Dallion stood frozen, his mind trying to catch up with what he had heard. The original plague had never been intended to separate the weak from the strong. It wasn't even a plague, but an attempt to ensure the survival of the realm's inhabitants up to the point that they could return to the real world once more. Given the state of the other two swords, they had done remarkably better. Unfortunately, not well enough.

Wasn't there a way to fix the damage? Dallion asked.

There were attempts. It had taken centuries for the entire fauna to acquire their present qualities. Once it was everywhere, though, reverting it proved impossible; there were no normal plants left. And even if there were, it wouldn't have mattered much. It was the animals that brought on the crises, well before the dryads started being affected. You see, the same principle applied to them. Within one generation, only awakened creatures remained. Of course, that wasn't a problem. Not directly, in any event. People could eat plants all they wanted.

And that made things even worse.

Dallion could already imagine millions of people eating poison without even knowing it. They probably hadn't even made the link at first. With a vast part of the initial population being awakened and otherworlders, the effects were not as visible and chalked down to life in a realm. However, as the awakened decreased with each next generation, things must have gradually gone worse and worse, until a tipping point was reached. It was understandable why everyone would turn to the Star for help at that point.

The tower cities were the final attempt. A terrible way to live, but at least in which dryads got to survive to an old age. The awakened would roam the land and bring food; animal meat for the non-awakened. Contact was limited.

One group provided food and protection, so that the other group could breed awakened, Euryale said.

That about sums it up.

Protection from what? the gorgon asked.

The guardian didnt answer right away. Instead, he took a step forward.

You can get closer, he shouted Dark, seeming to ignore Eurys question. As long as you dont try and enter the temple, I wont stop you from flying about.

In typical Dark fashion, the dragon folded its wings, indicating that it had no intention of flying at all.

Thats why you dont want us to, Dallion said. Youre afraid that we might cause the dryads there to get sick.

Yes, but not in the way you think. I still have enough control of my domain to purge all pollen and food you bring with you. However, seeing you, talking to you, would spark curiosity. And once theres curiosity, theres nothing I can do to keep them safe.

Protection from what? Euryale repeated, taking a step forward.

Isnt it obvious? The guardian smirked. From me. In their eyes, Im Moon spawn responsible for all the evil that has befallen this world. They are helpless without me, and yet they also hate me.

The last one? Dallion asked. I thought that there were two?

And who told you that?

The realization hit Dallion like a thunderbolt. Just because he hadnt sensed any lies in the previous guardian didnt mean that he had heard the truth. When it came to emotions, the only thing the music skill showed were the things going through a person at that precise moment. The guardian Dallion and Eury had spoken to before had been convinced of everything he was saying. He had further presented it in such a convenient fashion that neither of the pair had seen the obvious: they had not once spoken to a guardian. Rather, they had only spoken with an echo.

Youre the only guardian, Dallion said.

Bravo. Yes, Im all thats left. And that is why youll find no other temples in the realm either. One temple, one guardian, cast out at the ends of the world with a small consolation prize: as many dryads as I can fit inside.

Trees and bushes rose up from the ground, forming a small forest. Realistically, it was far from a forest, just enough placed around Dallion and Eury to create the illusion of one. Even so, they illustrated the point perfectly. As long as the dryads remained in the temple, the guardian could create the illusion of many things. Having outsiders come, though, would break the illusion.

Its just another prison, the gorgon noted.

Maybe, but it doesnt feel like one. Youve been to the tower cities. You know what its like there. As in the real world, here things are only good or bad in comparison. The prison I offer is much better than the alternative, to the point that its no longer a prison. After all, isnt the entire realm a prison as well?

Point taken, Dallion thought.

So, what do you want? he asked again. What do you really want? For us to help you create plants that dont kill non-awakened?

No one can create that. All I want you to do is help you make me stronger.

Any idea what hes talking about? Dallion asked.

In this case, not in the least. Keep in mind, dear boy, that hes quite a bit older than me. There are technologies and practices that vastly exceed my knowledge of

He wants you to fight him, Vihrogon interrupted. He wants you and Eury to fight him and win.

That made sense. In fact, that made a lot of sense, considering the situation. If they were to defeat all the guardians in the realm, the item would improve. Thinking back, Dallion tried to remember the blue rectangle that had appeared once he and Eury had been cast into the sword realm. At the time, he hadnt paid too much attention, but he was almost certain that the items destiny wasnt sealed. If the dryad was to be believed, and he really represented the last guardian, defeating him would improve the item, and through that the entire world. Dallion had done the same back in Neorsal, when he had defeated the overseer.

I see youre realizing what Im saying. The guardian nodded. So, do we have an agreement?

What will happen with the echo near the city of towers?

The echo is a memory of what I was before the mage entered the realm. It has no place in the new world.

Easy for you to say, you wont be the one dying, Dallion thought. Despite that, he had to agree.

Ive one question, though. When the mage came here, he found a way to kill the other guardians. Why did he spare you?

He didnt have a choice. Magic has a way of bending the rules, but it cant break them. A realm can have multiple guardians, as youve seen. However, I cannot have less than one. He could easily have destroyed me, but then, the realm would collapse and hed be left with nothing. It would have been even easier for him to kill me, but that would come with its own set of complications. So, he made me an offer: dont meddle with the realm or his work and I get to protect as many of the remaining dryads as I could. He made it very clear that he didnt need any of them, he just needed me and my cooperation.

Specks of pain appeared throughout the guardian. Even with his effort, he couldnt keep all the emotions from leaking out. By all accounts, the mage must have made him make a Moon vow not to meddle, though even if he hadnt, there wasnt much he could do.

Cant you just surrender? Dallion asked.

Not this time. The battle must be real and visible for all to see. The fiercer the fight, the stronger Ill become after I improve.

There was a logic to that. Dallion was just about to give his answer, when he felt Eurya hand on his shoulder. The snakes on her head stirred back and forth for an instant, letting him know that she didnt approve. The guardian, apparently caught on to that as well, for he turned her direction.

Youre hesitant? he asked. Its the only way for you to leave the realm.

How strong are you? she asked.

Does it matter?

I think we should be able to take him on, Dallion interjected.

Do you? All previous world guardians we thought were severely weakened because their realm was overrun by cracklings. Not to mention that he isnt just some guardian, hes all nine of them in one. Fighting him would be like fighting a noble. Im not sure either of us is ready for that. Thats why I need to know how strong you currently are.

Suddenly, the guardian changed form. The small figure grew to a muscular dryad, seven feet tall, wearing a full set of ebony armor. All traces of feebleness cast away like a snake shedding its skin. Even after everything Dallion had been so far, he couldnt help but feel slightly intimidated.

Im using some of my strength to maintain the temple, he said, an aura of strength emanating from him. But you are right. I am a full noble, and thanks to the plague of the realm, there hasnt been anything to drain a significant part of my strength. A wooden halberd rose up from the ground before him. Im eighty-three. That's roughly the level one has to be to become a world guardian. Now that you know, will you do as I asked?

Chapter 548: Triple Combat

COMBAT INITIATED

Both Dallion and Eury jumped back, drawing their weapons.

Gleam, Dark, well need your help on this, Dallion said.

It was tempting to think that the three of them would be enough to take the guardian down. After all, in the past Dallion, Eury, and Jiroh had managed to take down a mage, and that was when Dallion was considerably weaker than he was now.

However, despite their number advantage, and the considerably better gear, none of them could shake the faint feeling of dread that had crept in. Thanks to his music skill, Dallion could clearly see it within everyone, hiding like small grapes in a fruit salad.

The guardian had insisted that close to a fifth of his strength was dedicated to keeping the temple poison free. Even if he was to be believed, there was no way to measure exactly how much one fifth was in practical combat terms. Also, the remaining four-fifths were more than a sufficient challenge.

Dark and Dallion split into instances simultaneously. Being straightforward as he was, the dragon directly engaged with a series of line attacks. The attacks were sloppy, easily evading. However, to everyones surprise, the dryad didnt evade or even block it, doing an attack of his own instead.

ATTACK NEGATED

DARKs attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

Hes an attacker, Dallion said, gripping the hilt of his harpsisword tightly. He can negate attacks.

While that wasnt particularly good news, it told everyone that the guardian didnt have any guard skills. Just for good measure, the dragon attempted a point attack. That, too, was effortlessly negated.

Close range? Dallion asked, as he moved closer to Euryale.

Close range, she replied.

The sensation almost felt nostalgic. It had been over a century true time since the two had fought together. Their habits, however, remained.

A series of targeting markers appeared on the dryads body. At his current level of perception, Dallion wasnt able to see any information regarding the guardian, including his name. Euryale, however, was a different matter entirely. Being a gorgon with a much more developed perception, she likely could see all the information there was.

Hes got carving, she said. And scholar.

Not the best combination. It was pretty much a given that he had all common skills besides guard as well.

Shield, Harp, any help on this?

Not in this fight, the armadil shield replied. Sorry.

Dallion expected as much. The time in which his gear would step in had passed. Now it was all up to him and anything he could use to his advantage.

Go, Euryale said and dashed forward.

Splitting into five dozen instances, Dallion did the same. Every few steps, hed split again and change his approach path. It was obvious that he wouldnt be able to trick the guardian, but at least he hoped to be able to attract the dryads attention.

That was when the guardian made his move. Moving almost too fast to be perceived, he dashed straight for Dallion, halberd at the ready. There were no instances, no echoes, or other tricks, just an ordinary dash reaching Dallion before he could react.

The tip of the halberd went for his throat. Thankfully, Euryale proved to be fast enough to pull Dallion at the right time and move him to just the right angle, so the blade slid over him without doing any damage. Aware of what was going on, Dallion relaxed his torso so as, while simultaneously doing a line attack with his right arm. Euryale didnt delay either, starting a barrage of punches aimed at the guardians side. Sadly, none of them reached their target.

Twisting the halberd twice, the guardian pulled it back and slashed the air.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

ATTACK NEGATED

DARKs attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

A pair of red rectangles emerged in front of Dallion, along with a nasty cut on the upper area of his chest. There was a time when Dallion would have paused, in awe of the way in which his opponent had handled the situation. Since becoming a hunter, however, he knew better, quickly continuing with his attacks. While wounds in his present state couldnt be healed, losing the initiative would be a far greater mistake.

The air blurred as Eury and the guardian exchanged blows. The lack of rectangles indicated that neither was able to hurt the other. Considering who their opponent was, that was good.

Dallion turned his harpsisword so he could play a series of chords. Although not many, there were enough emotional points he could try to latch onto. Alas, just as Prolet was able to fight Eury to a standstill, he also managed to simultaneously slice through Dallions music attacks as well, severing the connection between the harpsisword and himself. Two more strikes followed, aimed specifically at the weapon. One hit, breaking one of the harpsisword strings. A momentary scream sounded in Dallions realm.

Harp! Dallion shouted.

Precisely at that moment, the dragon also made an attempt to join in. Slower and less perceptive than everyone else, he let out a breath of cutting air, aiming for the guardians back.

From Darks perspective, his attack had occurred a split second after the dryad had attempted to pierce Dallion in the throat. For everyone else, it was with such a delay that the dragon might not even be considered to take part in the actual fight.

Simultaneously, Eury, Dallion, and the dryad leapt back, letting the cone of air hit the spot where they had been fighting up to now.

Harp, how bad is it? Dallion took advantage of the pause to ask.

Shes mostly fine, Vihrogon replied in her stead. Just avoid using music. It wont help either way.

Its his only weakness, Dallion countered, his thoughts still on the nymph guardian. Ever since he had known her, she had only been hurt a few times, and each time, it was incredibly painful. Not that it made her hesitate when attacking. That was the thing about combat gearthey were more used to inflicting pain than receiving it.

No, the armadil shield said. Its yours. When you switch, it gives him a chance to attack.

That made things considerably more difficult. As much as he didnt want to admit it, Dallions music skills were a considerable part of his combat repertoire. Lately, he was starting to rely more on line attacks and familiars, but those didnt seem overly efficient either. It seemed that the guardian had an answer for everything.

Hold firm! Euryale shoutedthe signal for Dallion to close his eyes.

Dark, get out of here, fast! Dallion ordered as he closed his eyes. Judging by the flapping sound, the dragon had done so, and even avoided getting petrified. However, based on the other noises, it seemed that the guardian wasn't affected either.

Standard! the gorgon shouted that he could look again.

Mentally, Dallion went through his skills, trying to think of a useful combination. Forging was out of the question. Arts could be useful, though not at the level he needed. Scholar skills were a definite option as well as come to think of it music, only not the type the armadil shield was thinking of. There was no need for Dallion to use the harp to sing.

Music, attack, and scholar, he thought, then started singing.

The first target of Dallion's singing was himself and Eury. If they were to stand a chance against the guardian, they had to approach his speed, if not match it. Prolet must have guessed his intention, for he charged forward right at Dallion. Once again, Eury intervened.

Guard, Dallion kept on singing.

Green markers appeared, moving about with such speed that they appeared to be flickering. The guardian had no intention of making this easy.

Gleam, I need a distraction, Dallion thought. Make something appear as a book. An invisible one, if you can.

Seriously? The shardfly didn't sound overjoyed. You're fighting a noble level guardian and I get to do parlor tricks?

Do you think you can face him?

Not at my current level. The familiar slid in her usual verbal jab, then fluttered to fulfill Dallion's request.

The halberd kept ribbing the air, leaving afterimages as it did.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

Several more red rectangles stacked up. Despite his best attempts, Dallion was unable to avoid all attacks, let alone compete in a full guard sequence. Eury fared almost as poorly, receiving a few wounds herself.

We haven't even hit him once, Dallion thought.

Keep calm, dear boy. It's not like you're that far behind. I'd say you're more or less on an equal footing. If not, the fight would have been all over by now.

That was little consolation, especially with the guardian shifting from piercing attacks to wide slashes. If this were a trial, Dallion would be focusing on finding a pattern that would lead to the question of the trial. Against living people, or guardians in this case, actions were more

spontaneous, even if they followed certain tactics. The dryads style of fighting was so old that there were no lasting records from it. Therefore, Dallion could only rely on out of the box thinking.

You're missing the obvious, the voice said in Dallion's head. There's always a question to be answered. You just have to find it. Or better yet, ask your own.

Anything more to add, voice? Dallion asked. It had been a while before.

Unfortunately, there was no answer. Usually, the voice was a lot more direct with suggestions, but now even it was using vague descriptors. Having no other choice, Dallion decided to look at the suggestion literally. Truth be told, there were a few things in the guardians behavior that didn't make sense. For one, Prolet consistently refused to combat split. Dallion kept on doing it non-stop, not that it was of great help; Dark did as well, and even Eury would do a partial split as she attacked. The guardian, though

Your books ready, Gleam said, carrying a minuscule tome as she fluttered towards Dallion.

Immediately, Dallion concentrated. Quills of ink and paper emerged from the illusion, darting wards around the dryad. Looking from the side, they seemed like a torrent of water.

The moment they got within a foot of the guardian; he'd slash them in two without a moment's thought. Looking closely, Dallion could swear that the dryad had created an echo of himself to protect his back. The only issue was that it wasn't an echo, rather his body and reaction speed were so great that he appeared to be in two places simultaneously.

What's the reason you don't combat split? Dallion wondered. Could it be because of Eury? Petrification did make things a bit riskier, but not that much. It made even less sense why he wouldn't create an army of echoes as well.

Possibly, the guardian didn't want to dilute his power. It was an unlikely explanation, though not out of the question. It was even likely that he, in fact, had created echoes, but kept them in the temple, keeping an eye on the other dryads. The guardian's main goal was to protect them, after all.

Protect them Dallion thought. Could it be that simple?

Dark, get back here and attack the temple, he ordered. Don't risk destroying it, just chip off part of the roof.

You sure? The dragon sounded confused. Alright, I guess.

With a single action, Dark flipped around, then flapped his wings. The thin thread of destruction emerged, flying straight at the temple.

ATTACK NEGATED

DARK's attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

A red rectangle emerged as the guardian slashed the dragon's attack. In doing so, he missed a quill that hit him on the shoulder blade.

MINOR HIT

Dealt Damage is increased by 10%

Got you! Dallion smiled.

That was the weakness, the same that the mage had taken advantage of: the guardian wasn't only protecting himself, he was protecting the inhabitants of the realm as well, and that was going to be Dallion's path to victory.

Chapter 549: The Standstill

Attack from the other side! Dallion told the dragon, while he himself did another line attack in the direction of the temple. His goal wasn't to destroy or even harm it, but the guardian couldn't take the risk.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

No sooner had the red rectangle appeared than Eury managed to get two hits in. The damage, while minimal, further reduced the dryad's life total to what hopefully was fifty percent. Being unable to tell was rather annoying, although Dallion didn't need to know. As long as they kept this up, they were inevitably going to win.

In a way, he almost pitied the guardian. There was no question that he deserved to win the fight, and he would have. Even working together all three could barely match him. Only through exploiting the guardian's desire to protect were they slowly chipping away at him.

If this was the only way to take down a noble, no wonder that intrigue was so deadly. Any scrap of information, no matter how insignificant, could end up leading to someone's downfall, regardless of the individual's strength. Maybe that was the reason Dallion's grandfather and his friends had been punished to such a degree. After all, no one needed a pawn that failed its mission, yet no one could trust one that had succeeded, either.

Two line attacks were done simultaneously from both sides of the temple. Unable to spot both himself, the guardian created an echo to assist him. Seeing this, Dallion continued with three more sequential line attacks.

This was the turning point. If the guardian managed to withstand the attack and keep the echo intact, the tides would turn very quickly. The difference of power would shift from three to one to three against two, then quickly shift into the dryad's favor.

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

ATTACK NEGATED

Your attack has been sliced in two by PROLET

Attack has no effect

Red rectangles stacked up one after the other. The guardian was focusing entirely on Dallion now, refusing to let any of his attacks through. His echo, as predicted, had gone after Dark, slicing off half of the dragons wing with a single attack. Euryale had intervened to save the situation. Golden threads were flowing out of her armor, creating the impression she was floating above the ground in a cloud of gold. It was clear why she had gone to the hunters guild to obtain it. No longer merely an object, the gear enhanced her athletic and combat skills, transforming her from a powerful hunter into a combat dancer. Threads shot at the echo as an extension of the gorgons strike. A significant cut from any of them was enough to destroy it in an instant. Sadly, even that wasnt enough. From the quick glance Dallion was able to get of the situation, the guardians echo had managed to swipe them away with an attack of his halberd before they could even get close.

More, more, more! Dallion drew the thread splitter with his left hand, then continued with a dual line attack. His right arm was already starting to feel numb. Gritting through the pain, he kept on going.

It was everything or nothingthe last thing one was supposed to do on the battlefield. Nil had often mentioned that an all out attack was a final act of desperation before defeat. However, it was also the wildcard that could turn a battle around.

Red rectangles were everywhere. The guardian was negating attacks left and right, while still managed to inflict damage to Euyale in the process. Aware that he was no match, the dragon had flapped away. Lacking the strength to any more line attacks, he focused on his illusion powers, taking the shape of a large tome. It was a sensible move. Sadly, Dallion was too engaged in the fight to use his scholar skill in the situation. Even if he wasnt, it would hardly make much difference.

Unable to feel his arms, he squeezed what strength he had to manage a few more line attacks. The effort was so great that he had stopped singing, gasping for air with every slash. And yet the guardian kept on negating them, as if they were nothing. Rectangles kept stacking up, growing beyond a dozen. Each one was identical to the last, until the very last moment, when one changed.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased 1000%

I did it? Dallions heart skipped a beat.

Sweat pouring down his forehead, he looked up, expecting to see the blue rectangle informing him of a skill increase. Instead, all he saw was the tip of a halberd thrusting his way.

The speed of the attack was too great for him to react on time. Thankfully, the armadil shield did it for him, expanding in size to prevent the tip from hitting any vital spots. Even so, the force of the attack was enough to propel Dallion back, as if he had been hit by a cannonball.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

The pain lingered for a moment before fading away. The alarming part was that the damage occurred despite Dallion guarding against it.

Its getting difficult keeping you alive, the armadil shield said. Can you move?

Dallion tried to raise his arms. While it was possible, it felt like bending steel pipes. After all the line attacks, it would be a few moments before they regained sensitivity.

What the heck happened? He asked.

Force shock, Vihrogon replied. The ability to focus force in such a way that it goes through solid armor, dealing damage along the way. You're lucky that he's only in his eighties. A dozen levels more and you wouldn't be alive to see the follow up.

The shield shrunk, returning to its normal size. Over a hundred feet away, Dallion could see the guardian breathing heavily. The attack, as powerful as it was, had the same effect on him as the first line attack Dallion had performed. The good news was that most likely the dryad wouldn't be able to pull off another one. The bad news was that he was still there, very much alive.

Eury was also visible, standing a few dozen feet behind the guardian. She, too, was in rough shape. Her overall health had been reduced to twenty percent. In addition, one of her arms was broken. In terms of realm combat, that was the equivalent of her having lost it.

He's down to a third, the gorgon shouted.

A third? That wasn't what Dallion wanted to hear. After all this, he was hoping that the dryad was down to his last ten percent or less.

The next few seconds passed in silence, a pause that seemed tremendously long. None of the participants had the strength to attack. If one side were to attack, the other would automatically gain the upper hand, creating an uneasy stalemate. Ultimately, it was all a matter of stamina: the first to gain enough to push on through pain and injury might well end up the victor.

Arms still tingling, Dallion slowly moved forward. Shortly after, Euryale did the same.

I didn't think an empath would fight that way, the guardian said, keeping his ground. Threatening the people under my protection is a low move.

Would I be still standing if I wasn't? Dallion hated himself for saying that. Even if he was careful not to touch the temple with his attacks, he was fully aware that he was counting on the threat to keep the guardian on guard.

To his surprise, the guardian started laughing.

Everyone keeps saying how difficult it is to become a noble. In a way, it has to be. Only one in a thousand manage to get there, maybe even less now depending on the changes in the real world. At

the same time, its painfully easy. You probably think that not everyone gets that way, that youll be different. Let me tell you now you wont be.

And youre so sure?

Thats how things are. I dont have to have seen every rock in existence to know that it would fall to the ground if dropped. Becoming a noble is becoming like a noble. If you ever pass through the gate, youll see for yourself. The guardian took a step forward, still leaning on his halberd. His legs were trembling as he did. The two of you are lucky, especially you, boy. Otherworlder humans have fewer limitations than anyone else in this world. Even magic creatures dont come close. You have every chance of becoming a noble. Maybe thats also your misfortune. If you do, you wont have any excuse for what youre about to become.

Dallion kept on walking. The numbness in his arms had given way to the sensation of pins and needles. Just a bit longer and hed be able to move them freely, maybe muster a final line attack.

You say that, but you dont seem like a monster yourself, Dallion kept on talking, using his music skill to add doubt in his words. The chances of the guardian being affected were slim to none. However, in a situation such as this, every little bit helped.

Im the last surviving jailor in a realm thats slowly killing all of its inhabitants, the dryad replied. We were aware that our actions might have unforeseen consequences, so we preferred it to the certainty of crackling decay. We were right, but others paid the price.

Are you sure you want to keep this up? We could end in a draw?

There can be no draw. For each of us to achieve our goals, you must win, but only after Ive done everything to stop you. Those are the rules.

Rules can be bent.

Funny. The guardian smirked. Thats the same thing the Star said. Everyone has to follow the Moons rules, but they can be twisted. That was the reason we chose to accept his help, even after knowing the fate of all those before us. Or did you think that we trusted him?

Dallion didnt reply.

You actually do, dont you? Thats one of the fallacies of humans. Your kind is simultaneously ready to betray anyone, yet you trust them as well. You look at beauty and mistake it for naivete. No one tricked us into accepting the Stars offer. There was no sudden betrayal or blackmail. A decision was made, one believed to be better than the alternative.

Clearly, it was the wrong one. Dallion raised his harpsisword. The weapon felt heavy, but usable. So was the thread splitter.

So, this is it? the guardian asked. One final attack? He glanced at Eury over his shoulder. The gorgon had stopped twenty feet from him, waiting for Dallion to approach on the other side. Chances are youll win. The two of you are good and have exceptional gear, but you arent nobles. The difference is just too large.

If it was that large, we would have already lost. A large part of your attention is on the dryads youre protecting. As long as youre distracted, well win.

Will you? Your dragon is out of the fight. The shardfly knows better not to interfere, and the two of you are too weak to do another line attack. If by some miracle you manage to pull one off and not faint in the process, Ill just have another echo sacrifice itself for me.

All for the greater good? Dallion let out a sad sigh.

All for the greater good. The dryad nodded. We both have reasons to keep on fighting, even if you think Im going against my best interests.

Im not. Im just sad that I have to win in such a way.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion then began to sing.

Chapter 550: A World's Destiny

Dallions voice rose up, filling the air. The sensation of wonder and allure flowed in the words, blossoming within all that could hear. It wasnt enough to change the attitude of the guardianthe dryad could resist without issue. However, they werent targeting him, but rather the ones he was protecting.

It started slowly, at first. A few dryads would peek from the temple doors, maybe go to the entrance to see what was happening inside. The moment they did that, they were already ensnared. Dallion's song described wonders and marvels in the world, tempting them to check it out. Even from this distance he could see the conflict brewing within them, like two large balls of color; caution urged them to remain where they were told it was safe, while curiosity pulled them out.

The guardians eyes narrowed. Dallion could see that he had figured out what was going on, however, wasnt able to prevent it. Or, rather, he was facing a dilemma. Still too weak from his last attack, he couldnt either wait until he was in a condition to fight again, and so risk the life of the dryads, or he could take his chances now while at a significant disadvantage. Neither of the options were good. Dallion was glad that he wasnt the one who had to make a choice like that, at least not yet.

Well played, the guardian said. Not elegant, but effective.

Dallion didnt stop singing, despite wanting to. He wanted to have a talk with the guardian, to tell him that if he were stronger, he wouldnt have resorted to such means. That was the thing, thoughonly the strong had the luxury of imposing rules on themselves. Dallion had seen it while hunting, but there was only a single life involved. Here, he was playing with the lives of many others. It was no longer a battle, but an all-out war, only at a smaller scale.

Just surrender, Dallion thought, hoping that it would end at that. However, the determination glowing within the guardian had only kept on increasing until it filled the dryads entire body.

There was a brief moment of hesitation. A strand of indecision materialized. Moments later, though, it was gone once more.

The guardian charged forward, aiming to kill Dallionthe one who was threatening the last remaining inhabitants of a poisonous realm. There was every chance that the attack would leave him vulnerable to Euryale, but it didnt seem it mattered at this point.

Hes fast, Dallion thought, moving his shield arm in front of his body. If the distance between the two was less, it would all be over by. Now, though, he had a chance.

He can still do a final attack, Nil raised his voice, alarmed by the development of things.

He wont, Dallion whispered. Reverse cocoon! he ordered.

The armadil shield extended, but only this time the curve was in the opposite direction, extending around the spot at which the dryad was going to be. There was no telling whether the guardian saw the trap or didnt. The end result was him ending up surrounded by a sphere of metal.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

Dallion felt as if his arm was being torn off his body. Even the shield hadnt been able to negate the attack, leaving Dallion at barely five percent health. The good news was it had completely exhausted the guardian, rendering him powerless.

Make an attack opening, Dallion said, collapsing on the outer side of the metal sphere. Without Luxs healing ability, he was finding it impossible to keep standing up.

Thankfully, Euryale was well aware of what had to be done. Catching up to the imprisoned guardian, she punched the air in front of her. Golden tendrils formed, thrusting forward through the opening that Vihrogon had created.

For a moment, all time stopped. Dallion felt the thud within the cocoon, but was uncertain whether anything had happened. Then it came: the red rectangle he had been hoping for.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Euryales damage is increased by 1000%

Open up, Dallion managed to say.

Youre in no state to be standing, Vihrogon said.

Do it.

Slowly, the metal sphere shrunk down to a half sphere, then to the shields original size. Dallion made an attempt to keep standing, but his legs gave up, causing him to start to fall. Before he hit the ground, though, Eury caught him.

Always the dramatic one, she whispered.

Ive earned it, Dallion managed to say. No sooner had he done so than another rectangle appeared above him.

WORLD RULER

(+5 Body, +5 Mind, +5 Reaction, +5 Perception)

You have successfully improved the world of the AURA SWORD. Improving a realm comes with pain or glory. It all depends on you. How will you shape the worlds destiny?

Are you seeing this? Dallion asked, pointing up.

I see everything, the gorgon replied with a smile. Didn't think I'll ever get a twenty point achievement again.

Dallion was so dazzled that he didn't even bother to ask the obvious question. Was this what being a domain owner felt like? Back when he had briefly become the owner of Nerosal, he had been taken aback by it all, but the feeling couldn't hold a candle to what he was experiencing now.

What do we do? Dallion asked.

You get to shape the world, of course, a familiar voice said. The dryad guardian had appeared as well, at least to a degree. He was semi transparent, surrounded by green light, almost as if waiting to fully form. You defeated me as a team, so you're the new rulers of the item and the realm that it holds. Usually, it's the one who struck the final blow that has to decide, but somehow I thought it would be better if both of you had a say. After all, you're an empath. He glanced at Dallion. You fought dirty, but you're still one.

Dallion briefly looked away.

That's all? Eury asked. We have to decide what the realm becomes and it will?

Not that simple. You're not nobles. You don't get to control everything, but just to guide it. However, it's within your power to do two things. For one, the moment you make your decision, you'll be thrown out of the realm. That's the one firm rule when it comes to prison items: they only keep those who are too weak to break out. As rulers, you're able to come and go as you please.

That sounded good. It was what they had set out to do, anyway. Of course, it would mean they'd face the mage. Their state wasn't the best, not to mention that he had to have been pretty strong to defeat all other world guardians and force the last to submit to his will.

What's the second? Dallion asked.

You can put an end to the plague, the guardian replied. Not the plague in the real world, but the one here.

On the surface it sounded useless, but Dallion fully understood what the dryad meant. With that one decision, the inhabitants of the world would get a chance to live. Maybe they would slowly repopulate the world to the point it was like before the curse was created. Of course, they would have to deal with rusk and cracklings, but they stood a better chance than all the other swords Dallion had been to.

If there's no plague here, others won't be able to use the sword as a weapon, Dallion said, glancing at Euryale.

The gorgon's snakes stirred. Gently, she listed Dallion up, letting him stand on his own two feet.

Can we bring the sea back? she asked.

You can. As long as it is similar to what exists, you can do anything you wish. The sword marshals made the realm according to their views of an ideal world. Now it's your turn.

It was a big decision. Not that it wasn't obvious what needed to be done. It was the importance of it that held both back from saying the words. In truth, they didn't even know whether they needed to say anything or just think about it.

Do we have to do it right away? Dallion asked. I'd prefer we get a bit of healing before we go back to the real world.

I suspect. However, you can't have anything you wish.

What happens to the realm after we leave? the gorgon asked. Will we remain its owners, or will you take over?

You'll always be the owners until someone defeats the guardians again. You can leave me, or you can call back the other eight guardians. It's all up to you.

I prefer that it's just you, Dallion felt the urge to say. There aren't enough dryads to need more. And there's less chance of conflict this way.

Maintaining the realm will be more difficult, but you're likely right. Is that your decision, then? He looked at each of them in turn. No plague, a sea, and me as guardian?

There were dozens of more things that could be added. Just thinking about it, Dallion could add flutters of shardflies, water equines, or many of the creatures he had seen in sphere item realms, but nowhere else. There could even be a flock of firebirds, so that Lux would have others of his kind. However, that was too much. It was like going down a rabbit hole: unless one stopped at the entrance, there was always a step further to go.

I helped too! Dark grumbled, as he approached. His wing had fully healed already, although the dragon did look less energetic than usual. Do I get a say?

No, the guardian said flatly. Dragons can't rule this realm.

Why not?

Because it wasn't made by you.

Well, I think

We've decided. Both Dallion and Eury said in near perfect unison, seeing the sparks fly between the young dragon and the semi-formed guardian. Apparently, dryads didn't get along with dragons. Who would have guessed? Do we have to say it out loud?

The dryad shook his head. Despite that, Dallion did.

I want the plague to be purged from this realm, he said.

And for the sea to return, Euryale added.

And for Prolet to be the realms only guardian.

AURA SWORD level increased

The AURA SWORD has been improved to a mono-guardian realm.

Your SCHOLAR skills have increased to 31.

A green rectangle emerged.

Thirty-one? Dallion thought. After all that fighting, that probably was the only skill that hadn't reached its cap. Not that he was complaining, but seeing its low number made the whole thing seem sort of cheap. At least I got an achievement out of it.

Getting a twenty-point achievement is quite significant, dear boy, Nil said. Not to mention it was a much-needed boost. Don't forget you have another fight to go through.

Dallion wanted to say how could I forget, but that would have been a lie. In truth, he barely remembered the circumstances under which he and Eury had been cast into the realm of the aura sword.

From what he could piece together, the two of them had rushed the mage in an attempt to distract him so that March could deal with him? Dallion's whole motivation was sort of blurry. Sadly, readjustment was going to be the least of his worries. Even with the trait boost, his health remained remarkably low. True, there was a difference between his health in a realm and in the real world, but the fatigue was the same. As he was now, a single hit could render him unconscious. It didn't even have to be particularly strong.

Any advice anyone can give me? Dallion asked in the fleeting fragments of a second before the return to reality. Not that he thought it would be of much use.

Just one thing, dear boy. Nil was the one to voice an opinion, as expected. Don't forget the dragon. Only two of you were banished into the realm, but three are coming out.