

## Leveling up 581

### Chapter 581: Mercenaries

The first thing that Dallion saw once his petrification subsided was the ground. Even with Luxs current level, it took a while for Dallion to return. Thankfully, the firebird had let him hit the ground before starting the process. The dartbladeLuxs new homewas somewhat more difficult to fly with, though that wasnt its main purpose. Dallion had put in a lot of effort to reforge the weapon as well as link a set of bolts, specifically so he could fight crackligns and other Star-spawn.

You feeling okay, boss? Lux chirped enthusiastically as color got restored to Dallion.

*Yeah. Thanks, Lux.*

The gorgon who had petrified Dallion didnt seem to care what was going on below, joining in the fight against the shardflies. Unlike people, the insects couldnt be petrified and had to be dealt with the old-fashioned way. What made it difficult was Gleams ability to use illusions. That was how she had transformed the whip blade into her awakening realm form. Furthermore, she had used her ability to render Ruby invisible. Now the only visible opponent for the gorgons was a shardfly that was impossible to harm. Meanwhile, her hidden partner could attack virtually unimpeded. That had led to a very destructive stalemateeither side could survive the attacks of the other, but not deal any actual damage.

Nil, think any of them have scholar skills? Dallion asked, slowly reaching for his harpsisword. There was no point in combat splittingthat was going to attract more attention than any sound he could make.

*Its not impossible, but not likely either. Mercenaries only target people, they dont need to know too many languages. Then again, it doesnt hurt to have the skills, either. Of course, its also possible that they arent awakened.*

Dallion had difficulty believing that. He hadnt seen much of their skills, but he trusted Gleam to give him a good assessment. If she was having difficulty against one of them, they at the very least knew what they were doing. True, so far, they hadnt resorted to combat splitting, but that didnt prove much. On the positive side, even if they could, it wouldnt matter, since Dallion intended to force the reality he preferred.

Dallion removed his backpack.

Youll need me, the armadil shield said. Against two of those, youll need all the help you can get.

Keep an eye on my still, Dallion said, placing the shield on the backpack. Speed and flexibility were here, not so much defense. Also, he preferred to be able to have two weapons when dealing with gorgons.

*Its a mistake.*

*If it is, Ill go down and fetch you.*

Using the bonuses of his reaction trait, Dallion moved his hands and fingers so fast that he created the impression he was holding two harpsiswords. Concentrating, he thought back to the moment just before he had been turned to stone. It hadn't been much, but he had caught a glimpse of his opponent. The gorgons were smart to wear blocker rings, but there was a chance that music could still reach them. There was also an absolute certainty that Dallion could influence the trees of the forest by combining his herbology and music skills. At the end of the day, Dallion didn't need the forest to know where the attackers were, he just needed the trees to be angry enough at everything in the area and react accordingly.

Dallion started playing. However, he didn't play it merely once, but twice. It looked as if he had sprung four hands, each pair playing a different harpsisword. One focused on affecting the forest, filling the air with anger, vengeance, and aggression. The other tried to establish a link to gorgon. Dallion had seen adding weight and clumsiness.

Branches shook, snapped, and even twisted, making it difficult for any foot to remain on them. At one point, one of the gorgons lost his footing. Dallion was just about to enter the fight as well, when suddenly the gorgon combat split. It wasn't much more than five instances but it gave Dallion an answer to his question: at least one of the gorgons was awakened after all.

Be my eyes, Harp, Dallion said while closing his. The strings of the weapon vibrated, allowing him to get a sense of his immediate surroundings. The second pair of hands disappeared. Dallion switched the grip of his harpsisword and rushed up, leaping from tree to tree like a squirrel. Barely had he gone twenty feet up, when over a dozen flying knives flew in his direction. They were small, thin, more like spikes than knives, mercilessly hitting several of his instances right in the shoulder.

Given the level of skill the gorgons had displayed, this wasn't an accident. They had missed any vital points deliberately, suggesting they needed him alive.

Forcing himself to run even faster, Dallion grabbed the Nox dagger. He could feel Nox purr eagerly. Since his level up, the crackling had become exceedingly like a large cat, which meant that it almost exclusively did two things: sleep and hunt. Now it was time to do some hunting.

Eyes still closed, Dallion spun around, slashing at his unseen enemies. The level of the perception trait allowed him to sense that they were near. Harp's assistance narrowed the spot at which they were at.

Two your left and just behind you, the harpsisword's guardian instructed, creating a mental image in his mind. It wasn't an image she provided, but rather a subtle series of sounds indicating the precise location of his opponents.

Fighting two enemies, the gorgons took turns defending and attacking. One would parry or block his own attacks, while the other would follow up with an attack from the flank. Simultaneously, they and for that matter Dallion himself had to be wary of the shardfly's continuous attacks, and the trees' hostility. Dozens of instances filled the combat zone. Over two-thirds of them, on all sides, were killed or injured moments after appearing. Flying knives would fly by, each killing an instance.

What weapons am I facing? Dallion asked. He couldn't sense any guardians, which meant that they had some blocking item affecting them, or the weapons were sphere items.

Knives and gauntlets, Gleam replied. One of them has an elbow buckler.

*Elbow buckler?*

Dallion had only seen those in combat instruction scrolls. Supposedly, they were an elite piece of gear, which was to say they were quite deadly in the hands of an expert and hazardous in the hands of everyone else.

The sound of metal hitting metal combined with the rustling of leaves and snapping of branches, Dallion and the gorgons would get quite creative in their instances. Acrobatics, athletics, attack, and guard were used in every exchange. On multiple occasions, the gorgons used their gauntlets and even armor to deflect attacks the same way Euryale had taught Dallion to do. Even while using Nox, it seemed impossible to get a good strike. Eventually, the crackling got its way.

Got him, Nox said as the dagger blade came into contact with the buckler. The moment it did, a spiderweb of cracks appeared covering the entire metal surface.

After a second successful hit, Dallion changed tactics. Opening his eyes, he had all his instances spin around and do a sweeping kick aimed specifically at the elbow buckler.

One kick was enough to shatter it to pieces, causing the gorgon to fall off the branch. To be more precise, it wasn't the kick itself that sent the gorgon falling. Rather, the branch Dallion and the gorgon were standing on snapped off the rest of the tree. Normally, this wouldn't be an issue. The gorgon split into twenty instances. Nineteen of them managed to land on a nearby branch without issue. However, Dallion used forced splitting to make the remaining instance reality.

The snakes on the gorgon's head swirled in surprise as he found himself falling down. The very same moment, Dallion focused his attention on the remaining gorgon.

Gleam, wrap him! he said, attacking with both harpsisword and Nox dagger.

Seeing the effect of the Nox dagger, the remaining gorgon twisted and turned, avoiding the blade of the weapon at all costs. The pressure of the fight was so intense that he didn't even notice the whip blade extend around his waist. A second reason for this was the whip blade being invisible. While Gleam had followed Dallion's order, she still maintained the illusion of being a shardfly, just one that could no longer perform her usual wing attacks.

Feeling the invisible segments coil around him, the gorgon stopped attacking and moved both arms against his torso, forearms pointing up so that the gauntlets could keep the whip blade from harming him.

That's one, Dallion thought.

Briskly, he turned around to deal with the other gorgon. Sadly, he wasn't fast enough.

Stop! the gorgon said, pointing a weapon Dallion hadn't seen before. It looked like a brace one would put around the gauntlet for increased strength, but Dallion's forging and scholar skills told him that it was a long-range weapon. Even splitting won't help you escape this. He didn't seem to be lying.

If I go I'll take you with me, Dallion replied calmly.

We haven't been ordered to fight you. The gorgon's snakes stirred. Yet.

What have you been ordered?

Do we have a ceasefire?

Gorgons weren't a species known for politics, so when one made such an offer, Dallion was inclined to believe it.

Vow by the Moons, Dallion said.

I vow by the moons that I won't harm you or yours today, the gorgon replied.

I vow by the Green Moon that I will not fight or harm you today, Dallion replied. He could have added that he wouldn't harm any items, but being an empath that was understood.

The gorgon lowered his weapon.

Let him go, Gleam, Dallion said.

The whip blade regained its standard visible shape, then uncoiled, and moved back into Dallion's scabbard. Ruby followed shortly after, handing on Dallion's shoulder. His wings, though, remained open, displaying their bright redness as a warning.

Thanks, the gorgon facing Dallion said, making a sign for his companion to join him.

While that occurred, Dallion played a few chords to calm down the trees. There was no need to keep them trying to harm everyone involved anymore.

Gleam, get my things, Dallion thought.

What do I look like? The shardfly laughed.

*Please, Gleam. I have a feeling that if I step down, I won't see them again.*

Gleam grumbled, then had the whip blade leave Dallion's scabbard once more. Next time tell me sooner! She extended, flying down to fetch the backpack.

The gorgons on their part seemed rather relaxed. The taller one, who had made an offer, was checking his elbow to see whether there was any additional damage resulting from the shattering of the buckler. The other seemed a lot more focused, half of his snakes staring at Dallion.

What are your orders? Dallion asked.

What do you think? the shorter gorgon asked.

No need for that. The order's tone was firm, indicating he was the one in charge. Im Aias.

Dal. Dallion hadnt heard of him. He wasnt a hunter, that was for certain. Mercenary?

Thats not part of our deal. However, since youre reasonable, Ill say that weve been hired to do the same thing you have. This little trip was just to check your skills. Youre a bit better than expected. I didnt think youd notice us, or pick a fight.

Your friend didnt seem of the same opinion.

My brothers still young and emotional. Stoning you was rash. Although I knew youd handle it. If not, you wouldnt be as impressive as youre claimed to be.

Nice to know someone has a good opinion of me.

In this province, the gorgon pointed out. But yes, after the things youve done, people are starting to keep score, especially when youre after the prize they are. In fact, many have even started betting wholl get to the phoenix first: you or one of the other parties.

#### Chapter 582: Friendly Warning

The younger gorgon went through the forest in search of his throwing knives. The task was thankless just as it was pointless. Clearly Aias was displeased with his brother and found a not-so-subtle way to punish him. There was a certain strictness to the race that made them appear distant and emotionless in the eyes of others. Having lived with a gorgon for years, Dallion knew that was not the case. The members of the race were just very direct when it came to a lot of things, also they seldom took comments personally, only secrets.

Youre not here because of the hunt, Dallion said. There wasnt enough time for that.

Youre both right and wrong. We were hired to keep an eye on you months ago. Even since you humiliated the Archdukes son.

Dallion feared there would be repercussions for that, but he never expected things would escalate to this point.

The whole thing about the phoenix just pushed us to go closer. To be honest, I didnt think youd notice us. You must have improved since the last time I checked on you.

Dont we all? Dallion asked, not a smile on his face.

No. Only the otherworlders. Even with the blocker ring still on, bitterness was visible on the gorgons face. The hunt is an excuse, but a good one. Our orders were to keep an eye on you, but after your visit to the Academy, things were kicked up a notch or two. The next time we meet well probably have to fight you or not. It all depends on the whims of the Archduke.

He hired you?

Of course. Directly. As I said, humiliating his son was amusing, but the ease with which you did it, wasnt. Even less amusing was working for a noble that might change him in a month.

Of course, it is. Dallion sighed. Thanks for the warning.

Youre very welcome. Its nice to have a challenging target. Lately weve been dealing with pathetically easy prey.

The goodbye was brief and not at all pleasant, feeling more like a warning than anything else. For the first few miles Dallion kept sending Gleam back to check if the gorgons were following him. If they were, their skill had improved considerably since a while ago.

There was no interference for the next few days. Even so, Dallion chose to leave the forest from a different spot he had initially planned. His plan had been to take advantage of the forest to conceal his presence and continue through it north for as long as he could. Having been the subject of two attacks, though, he went straight west, leaving as quickly as possible. From there, he continued through the wilderness towards Lanitol, skipping all towns and villages on the way. More and more frequently, he'd come across patrols roaming the province. The hunter emblem did all the talking for him. Even so, the further north he got, the more frequently the armies became, just as the questions got more focused.

Lying on the ground, Dallion flipped through his bestiary. All seven Moons were shining in the sky, making the night bright as day.

Harp, have you ever seen an aetherbird? Dallion asked. After everything that had happened, he preferred not to say anything regarding the bird out loud, even when he was almost certain that he was alone.

No, came the response. It was unclear whether the nymph guardian hadn't seen one, or just refused to discuss the topic.

*Vihrogon?*

I was part of a hunt, the armadil shield replied. Back then, they were massive things, not the children's scavenger hunt that passes for hunting nowadays. An entire army went out to hunt the creature, though the results were similar.

*So, you didn't catch it?*

*I didn't even see it. The whole thing continued for two weeks. After that, the noble in charge decided we had better things to do than waste our time going through cliffs and forests.*

*Cliffs and forests? It's that where the aetherbird likes to stay?*

*If I knew that, I'd probably be a far happier dryad. Some people believed so. I didn't care. It was a good opportunity to make yourself important. If you weren't engaged, you could have tried the approach. You'd be surprised how much attention people get after casually mentioning that they were part of an aetherbird hunt.*

*And there's nothing more you can tell me about it?*

*The mage told you everything there is to know. Just because it's rare doesn't make it any more special than most other wilderness creatures. Just immortal.*

Dallion kept on reading the dragon section. Not too long ago, he considered them to be the strongest creatures in the world. From what Nil had told him, the Academy had spent a lot of effort and resources to learn as much about them as they did. Most of the information was centuries, even millennia old. At present, of the seventeen dragons mentioned in the bestiary, only one was

confirmed to be alive the father of the dragonlet Dallion had freed into the real world. In contrast, there was not a single sentence mentioned about the aetherbird. It seemed strange to keep the creature such a secret, given that the phoenix feathers were pretty much common knowledge. Maybe the average person wasn't informed, but most nobles, hunters, not to mention the members of Academy and the Order of the Seven Moons, all were aware. The appropriate question was whether that was because they were imposing the secret through their area guardians, or was it the Purple Moon doing so?

Gleam, Lux, keep an eye out, Dallion said, putting the book away. I'll get some real sleep.

The nap was only a few hours, but was filled with the usual chaos and awakened of Dallion's level experienced. There weren't any memories from Earth, thankfully, but more than enough about Eury. The gorgon seemed to be riding on a carriage with Dallion in the back. The territory they were riding through seemed somewhat familiar, although Dallion couldn't exactly place it. Most likely, it was somewhere far north on the other side of the Empire.

The wagon was full of crates. Opening one, it was quickly revealed that they contained weapons of some sort: explosive bolts large enough to fit a crossbow. Dallion had no idea where they were transporting them, or why, but he knew that it was very important that they did.

Don't be nervous, Eury said. We're almost there.

I'm not, he lied. He could tell that there was some unspecified danger linked to the whole thing. I'm thinking of leveling up soon.

Eager to become a noble? A cluster of Eury's snakes turned in his direction. Don't be. Things only get more complicated.

At least I won't be stuck dealing with the minor things.

If you're having difficulty with the trifles, how will you handle the really important things?

Dallion had no answer to that, not that it dissuaded him. If he became a noble, he'd no longer have to run around serving them all the time. Becoming a new player was much better than remaining the leading piece.

Two Moons appeared on the horizon. One was the Green Moon that Dallion was following. The other one had a pale yellowish color he hadn't seen before.

That's that Moon? Dallion asked.

Felygn, Eury replied without even turning around.

No, not that. The other one.

The comment got a quick reaction. The snakes on the entire back of the gorgon's head stretched out, looking at the horizon for several seconds.

There's just one Moon, the gorgon replied with a sigh. Dal, did you skip sleep again?

I slept, Dallion lied. And still, he could see two Moons, one of which wasn't supposed to exist.

If the Star was a Moon, maybe the sun could be as well? he asked out loud.

In all the scrolls it was written that there were Seven Moons and twelve suns, which represented constellations of skills. Yet, if that was the case, what did the real sun correspond to? It wasn't mentioned anywhere. Could it be the lost Eight Moon? Or maybe it was the Star, the scorching, merciless ball of power that burned everyone that tried to get close to it.

Just hang on a little longer, the gorgon said. Once we deliver the shipment, we'll be able to get some rest.

Dallion was just about to ask what exactly the shipment was when he woke up. The sun was just starting to appear from under the horizon, marking the start of the day.

You're awake! The dartblade floated just above Dallion's face. Morning, boss!

Hey, Lux. Dallion winced, pushing the weapon away. What happened while I slept?

A bear tried to attack, but big sis cut it up! The firebird guardian said eagerly. It was really cool!

You've been hanging around Onda too much, Dallion grumbled, slowly standing up. Gleam, what really happened?

*A wilderness creature got too near. I trimmed its ears, and it ran off,*

the whip blade said. *Ruby did some drawing again.*

Rummaging through his backpack, Dallion took one of the tasteless rations the Academy village had given him and started eating. Both the food and texture were terrible, but he persisted, swallowing it with a gulp of water.

This was usually the point at which Dallion would either fix or destroy the picture created by the shardfly so as not to leave obvious tracks. With Linatol being half a week away, this time Dallion decided not to bother.

Ruby, can you manage now to draw anything until we get to the capital?

The shardfly flapped its wings in rapid succession. It didn't like being made an example of, but rarely complained much about it, either. Fluttering a few times around Dallion, it finally landed on his shoulder, then closed its wings.

Let's go, Dallion said. Gleam, you know the drill.

There's one other thing that happened, the familiar said. There were a lot of clouds in the sky. Too many.

Think there might be a storm?

Gleam didn't reply, bringing the whip blade back into its sheath.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion prepped his backpack, picked it up and started walking. As time passed, he found that Gleam wasn't exaggerating when it came to the clouds. There were a bit too many for his liking. Rain and storms weren't something out of the ordinary, especially in the wilderness. However, where there were clouds, there was also a chance that there were furies. If



Archduke Linatol had hired a pair of gorgon mercenaries to keep an eye on Dallion, it was just as possible that someone else had hired furies to do the same.

The days passed slowly. All the time Dallion kept one eye on the sky. Thankfully, the only thing that came from it was rain. By the time he arrived at the capital, the clouds started to disperse, ensuring that the city always had a clear sky above it. It was part vanity, part paranoia. With both Nerosal and Linatol having a large fury population, one could never be sure who exactly a fury supported.

Get ready, Dallion said in his awakening realm. Were going back to the den. But before that well pass by an old friend.

Are you sure, dear boy? Dallion asked. Wasting time isnt the best strategy.

*No one will risk harming me in a citadel of the Order.*

*The stakes are a bit higher now. With the aetherbird being hunted, someone might take the risk. Of course, its your decision.*

*There are a few things I need to check out, since you refuse to give me answers.*

*Im telling you everything Im able to. Anything more and youll have too many distractions on your mind.*

Dallion shook his head. There was one more reason he wanted to visit a temple. It was the perfect place to level up, not to mention he could try to talk to Jiroh again.

#### Chapter 583: The Order's Offer

When I heard youve come back, I thought it was a mistake, the albino cleric said, looking at Dallion.

While the two were friends of a sort, they werent exactly close. Dallion preferred to stay away from Liantol, while the albino couldnt leave it. It seemed an eternity ago, when the cleric had been part of a hunting party sent to kill off a wounded chainling wandering the Archdukes lands. Dallion had barely awakened back then, and was impressed to see a double-digit awakened, especially one with a magic trait.

The bishop personally told me to be careful what I do should you come here, the cleric went on. I was to prevent you from entering the citadel and call the city guard if I had to.

Why didnt you? Dallion asked.

Only an idiot will stop a Moons favorite from entering a building of the Order. They can only punish me once, and being punished by a Moon is worse.

The cynical nihilism was just as strong as Dallion remembered it to be during their first meeting. Then again, the cleric had a reason to be like this. Lacking the skill to cast spells, his name had been erased throughout the empire. The only reason he had survived was because he had joined the Order at the first opportunity, where he had remained his entire lifecenturies in true time terms. From what Dallion could gather, the cleric had been beaten, starved, even imprisoned for decades within an awakened realm making him the person he was today. Not least of all, his skin condition ensured that he felt pain whenever he was exposed to direct sunlight.

Dallion followed the cleric along the common corridors to the inner section of the citadel. On the way, they passed by a room containing statues of the Moons in their moral forms. Each was represented by the race it patroned, or so one was led to believe. According to the scrolls Dallion had read, the Purple Moon was supposed to be the Moon of nymphs, but all he could see was the generic outlines of a faceless statue; only awakened with the magic trait were allowed to see anything related to that Moon. Still, Dallion wondered whether things would be different if he held a phoenix feather in his hand.

Have the cults been causing any more problems lately? Dallion asked.

Thats not funny.

I didnt know they were after me. I tried to help as much as I could.

Thats not what the survivors said.

Great, Dallion thought. First the Academy, then the nobles, now the Order. It was fortunate he became a hunter as soon as he did.

The cleric led on to the bishops chamber. Dallion expected to have a conversation with the person there, but to his surprise, the room ended up being empty. Even more surprising, the albino made his way to the empty seat behind the desk and sat there.

I got promoted, the cleric said in a matter-of-fact voice.

Youre the bishop?

No. Im the one who takes on the role when the bishop doesnt want to do something. Already being cursed has its advantages, chiefly that I can always get more cursed.

It was an interesting loophole. Since dealing with an annoying Moon favorite was a no-win scenario, the Bishop of Linatol had left someone else to handle the whole thing, namely Cleric.

So, what do you want?

Give me a moment to wrap my hand around this. Dallion took a seat. How much do you know about me?

Im up to date with the chaos you caused. I also know that youve entered the service of Countess Priscord. Thats another reason why the bishop isnt thrilled to see you. The countess isnt particularly liked here, nor are her allies.

Im not exactly an ally.

Youre close enough.

It was somewhat unusual that the Order wouldnt know about the aertherbird hunt, especially since everyone else seemed to know. Dallion had been left with the impression that the clerics knew everything, manipulating nobles and countries as they wished. Clearly, they werent infallible. Either that, or there was something more at play here.

Nothing I say will be revealed to others? he asked tentatively.

I vow by the Moons, the albino said with the annoyance of someone who used that phrase many times per day.

I've been tasked with finding the phoenix. In part, that's why I'm here.

The aetherbird? Didn't expect they'd try to get rid of you that way.

You think it's a wild goose chase?

No, it's a death sentence. You've already committed to it, so if you quit, the countess has an excuse to kill you, or use you for her own political gains.

I don't think so. She really has her sights on it, and she's not the only one. So, you really don't know anything about the aetherbird?

I'm just a simple cleric, not the Order itself. I know the basic gist of it. The aetherbird is the toy of the nobles. Every few years there's a contest to find it and each time it fails. Half the nobles claim to have seen the creature with their own eyes, of course. Interestingly enough, very few hunters do. That's because quite a few hunters have died trying.

How many is quite a few?

Impossible to say. Most had their names erased, so you couldn't find them if you tried. You'd have to ask them directly to find out, and if they're dead, that's not as easy.

That's possible? Dallion blinked. For something so impressive it was the first time he heard of it.

The albino remained quiet for several seconds, looking Dallion straight in the eyes.

No, he finally said. It's not possible. The point I was trying to make is that your chances of finding out are practically non-existent. Still, I suppose I can request access to the Order's archives. If there's something about the creature there, it should be easy to find.

If there were, it would also be easy to cover up. It was well known that the Order kept many secrets, just as they never shared them with the outside. Nil had often mentioned that most of the historic and skill learning scrolls originally came from the Order. The rest were personal records of noble families and discoveries among ancient ruins.

For Cleric to offer to do this, there had to be something he wanted. Cynicism had crept in, making him doubt virtually everything.

What do you want in exchange? Dallion asked.

Nothing.

There's no such thing as a free lunch, even for a Moon's favorite.

Maybe I'm waiting for a better time to make a similar request from you. As I said, I'm just a cleric, not the Order itself.

That sounded like a subtle hint that Cleric wanted to leave the Order. There was no way to tell for certain. As far as the world was concerned, the only way to leave the organization was to die or be excommunicated. The latter was a rare occurrence that, as far as Dallion was concerned, had never been used.

Id appreciate that. How long will it take you?

A few days, a week at most. Will you stay here for that long?

Probably. So, theres nothing you can tell me now?

Only the question you arent asking. The cleric reached into his robe and took out a small, folded piece of parchment. Look at this. he handed it to Dallion across the desk.

The moment Dallions fingers touched the parchment, the reality around him shifted.

## **ITEM AWAKENING**

The familiar free rectangle appeared, as Dallion found himself in an endless field full of sheep and white bushes. To no surprise Cleric was also there.

This was the first time he had been effectively forced into an awakened realm and he didnt like the sensation of it.

I didnt know you could do that, he said as the blue flames of lux enveloped him.

You can force splitting. This is like that, just different. The albino explained in vague fashion. The Order knows a lot. Obtaining information is quite easy. Its keeping secrets thats the real challenge. Once were done here, Ill burn the realm. Hopefully, that will give you enough time to do what you want to do.

The warning was too ominous to be believed, but using his music skills, Dallion was certain that his friend was telling the truth.

Alright. He nodded. What do you really know?

Aetherbird hunts arent new. However, theyre never the goal, just an excuse to shake things up. I wasnt lying when I told you that Im unfamiliar with the specifics, or you, for that matter. However, I know the Archduke and Countess Priscord. Just as its a fact that the creature exists, its also a given that once a noble starts the hunt, the rest must take part as well. As ludicrous as it is, none can take the chance that an opponent finds something of such power unimpeded.

Sneaky, Dallion thought. Now he knew why the countess was so open about his mission. It wouldnt be a surprise if she herself had leaked the information as far and wide as possible. Being a hunter, Dallion had assumed it was the creature she was after. This was a rather new twist.

Its said that the creature could appear everywhere throughout the world. However, theres a method to its chaos of Galateas quirks. No one can be sure where the aetherbird will appear, but when it does, itll remain in the general area for several months, up to a few years before moving on.

If a tree falls in the forest without anyone around, does it make a noise? Dallion asked. How can someone tell if something unseen is there?

They dont have to. The prospect alone is enough. However, I think the aetherbird has appeared.

A ball of trepidation formed within the chest of the cleric, quickly filling up the rest of his body.

Sightings can be faked, feathers can be smuggled in a province, but no one can force the Crippled from taking interest. And hes been doing a lot of that. You claim that the cultists that destroyed our monastery site in the western forests were targeting you. The Order knows they were, and also you arent the only one. Several more hunters were attacked. All of them made it out alive.

Thats good, then.

No, its bad And its also the reason why I must ask you to give up on the hunt.

The request hit Dallion like a lightning bolt. This was the last thing he expected from the cleric. To make it worse, based on the bouquet of emotions fluctuating within the albino, it was clear that he was trying to help.

The Order will welcome you, he continued. Youre already an initiate and favored by Felygn. The countess, the Archduke, even the emperor himself, won't be able to harm you when youre under our protection. Trust me. I know.

Ill just be changing one master for another.

Youre already serving a Moon. There will be no change. All you have to do is follow some of the teachings. Youll be able to see your friends, continue your relationship with your gorgon. In time, you might even be allowed to get back to being a hunter. There have been precedents, and if there arent the Order is always willing to make one.

The offer came with more limitations than benefits, which told Dallion that it was genuine. This was why he had been allowed in the citadel so easily, or at least one of the reasons. It was quite a low blow to have the Order use a friend to make their offer. Then again, that was what they did once someone became important enough to merit their attention.

What does the order gain from this?

The survival of the world.

Dallion felt chills run down his spine. The cleric was being serious.

The Crippled has become interested in skill gems lately. He used you to get his hands on a herbology skill gem. Now that youve taken that back from him, hes set his sights on the spell-casting gem. Dont make the same mistake you did before.

I thought it was impossible to obtain magic.

Just as it was impossible to obtain empathy? There always is a way. The laws of the Moons prevent him from getting the skill directly, but he can use someone else to get it for him. Even if it's a one in a thousand chance, that isnt a risk the Order is willing to take.

*Nil, I could use your advice on this.*

Im just as shocked as you, dear boy, the echo said. Ive never heard of the Order taking in followers in such fashion. If anything, they are doing their best to keep high-level awakened out.

Do I have to decide now?

You can take a while to think about it, but dont take too long. The longer youre in play, the more difficult itll become to end the hunt. The only condition is that upon joining, you make a Moon vow

never to go through your next awakening gate. A small sacrifice when you consider the alternatives. Think it over.

#### Chapter 584: Single Answer

The room was tiny, containing a bed that needed to grow by a foot to reach Dallions height. Whoever had designed the curates quarters had done a pretty poor job, or a good job depending on what the goal was. Dallion could imagine this being linked to some lesson the Order wished to convey to its members, although he struggled to see the practical benefit of such knowledge.

After looking at it intently for over a minute, Dallion finally sat down. There were no sheets, no pillows, just a pair of rough blankets. The albino had made assurances that should Dallion join the Order he would be treated better. Apparently, initiates were given special benefits. Based on what hed seen, though, that didnt seem to amount for much.

Dont tell me youre considering the offer, Nil grumbled. The Order doesnt usually lie, but thats not the same as telling the truth. That whole thing about saving the world, its a common tactic people used to get what they want. My original himself said the same to more than a few reluctant parents.

I thought the Academy took what was theirs. Dallion lied down, bending his knees so that his legs could fit. It was outright impressive how the Order had managed to make this place more uncomfortable than the wilderness, or maybe Dallion had become accustomed to space.

*Its always tricky when dealing with nobles. They always think they know best, living under the mistaken impression that if they keep their children with them, theyd somehow rival the Academy. Never underestimate the effect vanity could have on the powerful. Of course, there were the occasional ones that caused problems.*

*That ever happened to you?*

*Thankfully, no.*

Despite the echos assurances, Dallion felt couldnt shake the lingering feeling of unease the conversation of the cleric had brought up. Ever since his first encounter with the Star he had been carrying this fear, the obsession that the crippled was out to get him. He thought that after passing the awakening trial focused on the Star, he had dealt with the matter. Apparently, that wasnt the case.

Dallion closed his eyes for a few moments, then opened them again. Even the ceiling was bland, made in such a fashion that no one could look at it for long. After another few minutes of laying in fruitless attempts to fall asleep, Dallion stood up and left the room.

Night had fallen, leaving the corridors empty. In theory, there were supposed to be several dozen curates and a few clerics awake at all times. With the wars raging up north, the rules had been changed outright forbidding people from entering the citadel at night. It wasnt a solution Dallion would normally agree with, but being an initiate already, he decided he could use some calm and quiet.

Silently, he made his way to the chamber of the statues.

I could really use some advice about now, he said to the Moon. I dont want to cap my level. But I also know that Im not strong enough to take the Star. Heck, Im not strong enough to take a full noble. They really got me good with this phenix hunt. I bet the countess was waiting for me to become a full hunter, so I couldnt refuse her request.

Not that he would have either way. She had made it very clear to him that he didnt have any option. More than likely, she had waited for him to get his current title, so as to appear more of a threat.

Dont you have anything to say? Dallion asked, looking at the statue.

Youre doing a fine mess on your own, the statue suddenly replied. Why interfere now?

Instinctively Dallion tried to split into a dozen instances. When he tried, he found that he no longer had the ability. Not only that, but the Nox dagger that was always on his person seemed to have vanished.

I warned you that the Star cant find the phoenix on his own. What did you do then? Completely ignore me. The dryad stepped down from the pedestal. But when some minor cleric says the same, you act as if its the end of the world. Felygn didnt seem pleased. Dont you see any problem with that?

This is a dream?

Of course its a dream. Its time you start telling the difference. Any idiot could see a dream when its obvious. A marble table appeared in the middle of the room. There. Convinced now?

There was no way to respond to that. If Dallion said no, hed look like an idiot. If he said yes, hed just be parroting the obvious.

Before you ask, yes, I can arrange for you to have a chat with Jiroh. The question is, do you want to?

You think I should join the Order?

Of course not. And neither do you. Youre just scared of whats to come. Thankfully, youre smart enough to know that the Order wont save you. Despite our best efforts they remain mortal, and mortals can be easily tempted.

That much was true. Dallion had seen members of the Order killed by cultists. Of course, the clerics in question had questionable dealings with elements of the criminal underworld. It was safe to say that they werent exactly vigilant.

Youre hesitating which noble to back: the countess or the Archduke. The archduke seems the obvious choice, but if the countess has made her move now she must have something up her sleeve.

Can you give me a hint?

I gave you the power to raise your skills up to a hundred regardless of awakening level. You chose a familiar instead. Now you want me to tell you how to live your life best? Being your deity doesnt mean being your servant.

Youre only here because you dont want me to end the game, Dallion thought.

Im only here, because you want me to be here. I can hear every thought running through your mind. Youre begging me for another favor. A boon today, a debt tomorrow.

There was a time when Dallion would have jumped at the opportunity. Even now he wanted to, but he also knew that it wasnt going to help him. Favors came at a cost far greater than the short term benefits they provided.

Calming his thoughts, Dallion focused his thoughts. The Moons were said to be all-knowing, so he could ask anything from the location of the aetherbird to all the information relating to his enemies. Deep down, though, he felt that wasnt the way to go. If he wanted to move forward from his current state, he had to act, though cautiously.

Is there a way to catch the phoenix? Dallion asked.

Thats what you want to ask? Felygn tilted his head.

Its all I need to know.

If I tell you, I wont tell you anything else. You wont get to talk to Jiroh. Depending on how things go, you might never get another chance.

That means that the answer will be worth it.

A long time ago, back when Dallion was back on Earth, he remembered his father saying that the only way to win a losing game was not to play. The explanation didnt seem at all smart at the time. Dallion had been convinced that was something losers said. The only way to win was to get better at the game. When dealing with deities the principle no longer applied. Anything he could do they could do better, not to mention that they had powers Dallion couldnt even imagine. The only way to defeat a Moon was not to rely on it. As Nil liked to say, even advice could become an addiction if one relied on it too much.

Very well. The statues expression darkened. No, theres no way to catch the aetherbird, not unless youre a Moon. There was a momentary pause. The cleric told you that youll save the world if you join the Order. Hes not wrong, but hes not right either.

A riddle?

Consider it a small gift free of charge.

The statue clapped its hands. A split second later, Dallion jumped out of his bed. Seven hours had passed enough to bring morning, even if he didnt feel refreshed in the least. What he had gained, though, was a bit of clarity. While he intended to sleep in the citadel, he was going to disappoint the albino cleric.

The decision was converted during what passed for morning breakfast. Everyone was given as much as they needed, which for the curates means a bowl of porridge of some sort. While it had been prepared in such a way so as to be palatable for awakened, it wasnt something Dallion would voluntarily eat if he had the choice.

A few attempts were made on the clerics side to change Dallions mind, though without success. In the end he gave up, although he promised to keep his word and find out what he could about the phoenix.



Along with morning came the queues of people eager to increase their levels to twenty in exchange for a minor payment. Dallion ignored them as he exited the citadel. From there he went directly to the Archdukes palace. It came to no surprise that he was watched by the city guard, and possibly someone else, all the way there. To his great surprise, the guards at the entrance didnt stop him from entering. What was more, they even stepped aside, making it clear that he was expected, if not welcome.

Hunter Dallion, a tall woman dressed in a turquoise outfit approached. Judging by her clothes and demeanor she had to be a high-level attendant, probably the most important servant hed be allowed to talk to. Its a pleasure to have you visit. The womans tone suggested the opposite. Unfortunately, the Archduke is busy at the moment and wont be able to grant you an audience.

Thats unfortunate, Dallion played along. In that case, Id like to speak with the organizers of the night auction.

The night auction? the woman sounded surprised. Do you have any interesting finds?

Thats between me and the organizers. Dallion remained firm. Are they here?

I dont know. If you tell me what it is about, Ill make sure to

A sudden draft made her stop. Even before it, though, Dallion had noticed the reddish blur crossing the roomthe person he had come to see had made an appearance.

Ill take care of this. A crimson fury appeared. You can go.

Looking at the beings red hair made Dallion think of Di. She, too, had been transformed into something that wasnt supposed to exist. The bigger question was whether any of those transformations had to do with the aetherbird, or was it completely unrelated?

The female attendant nodded, then made her way to a nearby corridor, hiding from view. Within moments, the other servants and guards soon followed, leaving the lobby of the palace completely empty. Goot to know that the fury had so much power, and in the Archdukes palace, no less.

Good morning, sir. The fury greeted Dallion with a bow so low it seemed mocking. Dallions musk skills, though, werent able to pick up anything other than interest and curiosity. It appears youve developed a liking to our humble auction.

Hello. Do I get to learn your name this time?

I assume youd like to continue the conversation somewhere more comfortable, the fury avoided the question. I have some rather exotic refreshments ready.

No need. Im just here for one thing. Dallion took a step closer. Where was the phoenix feather found? he whispered.

The fury didnt blink. The polite smile remained on his face, although Dallion could feel the air currents around him increase.

That isnt something I can share.

Why not? Im not asking where its been, just where it was originally found. For the amount you sold it for, it must have a document of providence.

It was found up north. Thats all I can tell you. The family that sold the item was very clear that it didnt want any links between them and the auction. Naturally, the total anonymity of the actual seller has been guaranteed.

Just give me a location, Scarlet. If the fury refused to share his name, Dallion decided to come up with one for him.

Ive never heard that one before. A hint of annoyance flashed across the furys face. I really dont know. The story presented at the auction was fake. Since they were selling the genuine article, there was no need for a document of providence. Personally, Im not sure that the people that approached me were the real owners. Their family was prominent, but there were some inconsistencies in their story. The only interesting thing is that the sale was quite rushed. The person selling it definitely wanted to get rid of it in a rush.

How do you know?

Originally, there was to be another item for sale. The switch was made literally in the last hour.

That was interesting, though still another dead end. With the seller remaining unknown, Dallion was pretty much back to square one. No wonder the creature was so difficult to find. Not did it appear at random, but everyone related to its previous sightings was going through great lengths to keep all they knew secret. If the Temple and the night auctioneer had no information, that left the hunters den. If someone from there had even been hired for a similar hunt, there were going to be records. And where there were records, there was a pattern.

#### Chapter 585: Hunter Records

Large glowing snowflakes fell from the sky. Each was composed entirely of light, fading as it descended to the ground. Naturally, the upper platforms for most of it, while the people on the ground level only saw the sparkles as faint stars visible in the day. The local mage must have put in a lot of effort into this. Dallion had only been in the city two days, but based on everyones reaction, he could assume that it had been going on for a while. There was no doubt that the Archduke was getting worried, either due to the wars up north or the rise of Countess Priscord, presenting subtle spectacles to his subjects to demonstrate that he was still in charge of the province. For the masses, it probably worked. For those in the know, which Dallion had become, it seemed like the first stage of desperation. The way things were going, conflict in the province was inevitable. Win or lose, the countess had set things in motion and soon enough one of them would be dead or banished.

As Dallion made his way towards the hunters den, he thought of his grandfather. The similarities between the old mans life and his own were piling on. The man had also gotten involved in a war for dominance of the province. The sides were different, but most of the players were the same. The scary thing was that despite backing the winning side, Dallions grandfather had ended up stripped of rank, delevelled, and banished to his home village. Would the same happen to Dallion? It was starting to look that whichever side he chose hed lose in the long run either way.

Wetie province has always been a volatile area, Nil said. Its changed Archdukes more often than all of the other provinces combined.

*Thats not reassuring, Nil.*

*I didnt say it to reassure you, dear boy. I want you to be prepared. The south has always been like that. Some say because its far from the imperial capital. Its the reason most people end up being banished here.*

The true and tried method: when hiding something, put it as far away from the capital as everything else. Of course, Dallion knew that wasnt the entire truth. The banished cities happened to be always located near sites of ancient cities. In the case of Nerosal, the city ruins were directly underneath.

I should have left an echo with Aspan, Dallion thought.

The copyette would have been able to assist tremendously. Instead, he was going to rely on the questionable guardian of the hunters den. If there was a race that knew most about the world, it was the copyettes. Arguably, their civilization had seen the pinnacle of the world. Some argued that the nymphs had been more advanced, given that they were patroned by the Moon of magic, but Dallion had yet to get any information from them. Harp outright refused to discuss the topic, and Ondawho was extremely chatty, in principle was no better.

*Careful*

, a voice said, coming from one of the trees in the area. *Theres a group of people waiting for you.*

That was one of the positives of being one of the few empaths of the current ageguardians tended to remember Dallion. The same was in effect for plants, ten times as much.

What weapons? He asked, acting as if nothing had happened.

*Theyre resting two crossbows on me.*

Using a crossbow for city combat was a brave choice. There was no way that such a weapon wouldnt be discovered by the overseer or the city guard. That suggested that the people hired were amateurs at best, sort of the same thing Dallions group had been back when they were hunting the Archdukes sword. At his current level, Dallion felt pretty confident that he could handle them. In a way, he pitied the unfortunate souls. They had been sent to fail, just to send him a message. It was equally possible that they were hired by the Archdukes son, or some other local noble. Dallion was going to find out soon enough.

Calmly, he split into two dozen instances, each doing the exact same action. The lack of response suggested that his attackers werent awakened, or if they were, they couldnt sense splitting. A few moments later, Dallion started whistling. This time, things changed.

There was a series of clicks, followed by the sound of hundreds of bolts splitting the air. It wasnt just two that had been aimed at Dallion, but three times as many. Normally, such an attack would be enough to kill all but the particularly nasty creatures of the wilderness. Not a high-level awakened, though.

Ruby, stay close, Dallion ordered as all of his instances dashed in various directions. His layer vision allowed him to see all the bolts heading his way, the level of his reaction traitto safely evade them. Using one of his instances, Dallion tried to grab a bolt from the air. While the action was successful, it still shredded

the skin of his hand as he attempted to hold it. Apparently, he still had a way to go in terms of strength for such extravagance. In several of the other instances, he merely tapped the bolts, changing their path. The outcome there wasn't ideal either. Due to the high number of bolts directed in his general direction, and their explosive nature, the vast majority of instances were left dead or wounded. Three remained completely unscathed, however, and that was all that mattered.

Gleam, Dallion said. As he split again, waiting for the dust to settle.

The whip blade thrust out of its scabbard, darting in the direction of the closest attacker.

How many people are out there? Dallion asked the plants of the area.

A chorus of replies came in, almost flooding his senses. Four trees in total had felt the crossbows, but no one seemed to be sure regarding the people. As far as most were concerned, they hadn't seen people in days. Others insisted that there were still people in the area.

There's no one here, Gleam said as she extended the whip blade. Just crossbows.

If nothing else, the attackers were well prepared. All of them had blocker rings, rendering them invisible for guardians and plants, it seemed. It remained unclear why the crossbows were visible. Dallion was going to inquire about that. His leading theory was that the weapons were massive enough not to be affected by the blocker items. Either that, or the people had made it deliberately to let him know that they could get at him at any point.

Cute, Dallion thought. If it hadn't been for the trees warning, he might have ended with a serious wound or two. Even then, it was unlikely he would have gotten killed. Crossbows weren't stealth weapons, making a distinctive sound when used.

Get the crossbows and come back here, Dallion told Gleam. He fully intended to make the attempt cost his attackers something, even if it was the price of the crossbows.

The order was reluctantly obeyed. Annoyed that there were no enemies to fight, the shardfly would have preferred to slice up all four crossbows, but knew well enough that Dallion wouldn't permit that.

Taking them along, Dallion continued to the building. The door creaked open as Dallion approached. While the guardian didn't have the strength to open the door completely, he could affect the lock and leave the draft to take care of the rest.

Hi, Hawk, Dallion said, dragging in four crossbows.

It must be some hunt to have four of those, the guardian commented. What are you hunting?

Nothing. I was the target on this one.

The den was almost empty when Dallion got in. A single fury was in the space, reading a scroll. The dwarves and everyone else for that matter were nowhere to be seen. Looking at the hunter boards, Dallion saw that most of the hunters were on missions. Several of the remaining were marked as assisting which meant they were helping some noble with something most likely forging jewelry or weapons. That was far from ideal. For one thing, Dallion really disliked the fury.

I thought you said you won't be coming back here, the fury said in a mocking voice. It was safe to say that he didn't like Dallion either.

I'm here for work, Dallion replied, placing the crossbows on the nearest table. As you're aware.

Difficult not to be. One of the crossbows floated through the air, to the fury. No guardian, he noted. That means you can't tell who it belonged to. Mirror pools use them a lot.

Someone tried to kill me on the way here. They left these behind.

All the way here? Interesting.

You're not worried? Dallion had expected a somewhat different reaction. Even if they didn't like each other, attacking a hunter in front of a hunter's den wasn't to be tolerated.

There's nothing I can do. Vela might do something when she gets back. You'll be safe here until then.

I've already got a place to sleep. I'm just here to check the records.

You can't do that without her around.

The old records.

At that, the fury let out a mocking laugh.

Sure, go ahead. Let me know if you find anything. Just so as to mock him further, the fury used his air currents to get the tomes from the records room and pile them up on one of the free tables in the main section.

Twenty books piled up. Each had thousands of pages containing information from the first hunt that had taken place in the city to those ending five years ago. Everything more recent than that was kept by Vela.

There were no dates on the outside of the tomes, just a volume number written on the spine. Dallion took the latest and started reading back.

In theory, every mission contained the name of the hunters, the basics of the mission, the amount of money involved, and sometimes the client. Finding anything there was a feat in itself. Initially, Dallion tried splitting into instances, but he soon stopped. There was no cheating boredom.

On average, it seemed that a hunter did between three and seven missions per year. Skimming through the descriptions, all of them were significantly more massive than anything Dallion had done so far. Apprentice missions like finding artifacts, or catching small creatures of the variety Dallion usually did weren't even mentioned.

After an hour Dallion, all the missions started to look the same. Through the descriptions, he got a basic idea of what had happened throughout the empire. At one point, a lot of the hunters had been sent to the northeast, where there seemed to be a chainlink problem. Given the prices on paper, it

was understandable why Archduke Linatol had preferred to send his own hunting party to deal with the one in his lands. Going further back, even stranger things started occurring. Names were disappearing with increasing frequency, eventually leading to pages in which the entire hunter column was blank.

All the names are gone, Dallion said after seeing that for seven pages in a row.

Why do you think I wished you luck? the fury asked, and just to prove his point, opened a few of the older books with his air magic. There were no names there either. Hunters always get involved in things that are touchy. Just like the mission youve chosen. Id say that the lucky ones just die, but there are ways of erasing a name after death. Its safe to say that almost every hunter thats done anything important over fifty years ago has been erased. If youre searching for something like that, itll take you years to find it based on mission descriptions, if at all.

So much for finding a pattern.

Jirohs mentor, Dallion said. Im looking for his missions.

The smile on the furys face suddenly vanished.

Bad choice, he said, closing the books with a slam.

Chapter 586: Book Guardian

Youre lucky Eury isnt here. Shed have torn your tongue out.

Dallion had seen Eury in lots of different lights, but this didnt sound like her at all. He had heard talk, mostly from Hannah, that the gorgon had been extremely flirty and a slacker back when she used to work at the Gremlins Timepiece. There were a few occasions in which she had heard hints there might have been a violent side, though he thought that to be her standard hunter attitude. By the sound of things, it went a lot further.

Im just interested in one of his missions. Dallion decided to avoid the conversation, at least until he could have it with someone he liked better. Not the person.

Which mission?

Im not sure. The mission that got him to find Jirohs sister.

There was a noticeable sign of relief on the furys face. The emotions emanating from him, though, indicated that the fury felt as if hed dogged a bullet. Somehow, Dallion doubted that was just because of Eury. There was something more hidden there, probably the cause of the hunters name erasure.

I think he might have found a phoenix feather around that time, Dallion added.

You cant think that he put the feather in Di, Nil said, shocked at the suggestion. Phoenix feathers dont work that way.

*You said magic could have caused her to turn into what she did.*

*Let me say it again. Feathers dont work that way. I could accept him finding a feather. I can even accept him putting it into the fury to hide it. Whats utterly impossible, though, is for it to have the effect weve seen. The feathers turn a non-awakened into an awakened. Thats all they do.*

There was no point in arguing, but Dallion had seen enough instances of things not doing what they were expected. Although even he was inclined to agree with Nil. Whatever had changed, Di had to be something else.

He did take part in a phoenix hunt, the fury hunter began. Several of den did.

When? Dallion glanced at the tome of records.

You wont find anything useful there. Special hunts arent marked as such. Itll probably say chainling hunt or have some other generic description. The people involved dont want any mention of the event.

Unless when they do, Dallion thought. It was clear that the countess had made a political play by announcing his hunt to the entire world. No wonder the cult and everyone else were onto him. That said, she had also unsuspectingly done him a favor. If it hadnt been for that, the gorgons wouldnt have tipped their hand.

So, I look for chainling hunts? There were a lot of those.

Its just an example. It could be dragon hunting or anything that a hunter thinks of. I put in half a dozen cloud catching jobs. They werent that.

Clearly, that information wasnt going to be very helpful. However, Dallion had one more way to find out.

Can you give me an approximate time? Will I find it here? he lifted the last tome of the series. Or do I need to go further back?

The one before. A lot of things happened in the last ten years. Results of the fury wars. No one talks about it, but the wars leave scars in the world and a lot fewer people to deal with them.

Dallion looked through the books on the table, then grabbed the respective tome.

## **ITEM AWAKENING**

Reality changed.

### **The BOOK is level 7**

Level seven was quite a high level for a book. Most of the scrolls and tomes Dallion had ventured in were level two at most. Looking around, he expected to find himself in a library. Instead, the place was a gallery with rows of paintings covering every inch of the walls. All the paintings were the same large, rectangular frames with white canvases and some black scribbles on top. One was tempted to call them modern art, but they seemed too stylistic.

**You are in a large paper hall.**

**Defeat the guardian to change the BOOKs destiny!**

Nice to be in a paper hall, Dallion muttered.

Suddenly, green markers surrounded him.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

Splitting into a dozen of instances, Dallion spread out in all directions. That didnt help much. Nine of the instances were destroyed on the spot before he could figure out what was going on. Of the remaining three, two got major injuries as illustrated by the red rectangles. Only the last remained unscathed.

Not taking his escape for granted, Dallion split again, this time in thrice as many instances. The results were shockingly similar. Only a handful managed to survive.

Lux, Nox! Dallion said as he split again.

The crackling panther leaped out of him, landing on the floor of the, while Dallion was surrounded by blue flames that rose him in the air. When he split on this occasion, nothing happened.

Combining layer vision with his music skills, Dallion looked about. It was at that point that he saw them: echoes, dozens of them, standing invisible throughout the entire space. There was no way to tell if they were armed, but each of them had blobs of anger and determination floating within them.

I see you! Dallion said.

There was no reaction.

Youre standing against the walls. He moved to the center of the room. Even in a multitude of instances, this was a risky move. However, it turned out his hunch was correct. None of the echoes attacked, standing like invisible sentinels that protected the paintings. He summoned his dartblade and pointed it in the direction of the nearest one. Right there.

The blobs of emotion moved a bit, as if to test whether Dallion was telling the truth. He followed them with the tip of his dartbow. After a while, the echo appeared.

Vela, Dallion said, surprised. However, it wasnt Vela, at least not exactly. The echo looked like what Vela would have been a decade ago. The stranger thing was that as the other echoes became visible, there were several more of her.

You shouldnt be here, another echo said. It belonged to the gorgon, who was second in command.

Neither should you. Dallion added understanding in his voice using his music skills. I came here searching for something that wasnt written in the book.

Nothing is written in the book, a Vela smirked. The important things are written here.

We make sure that the secrets remain, the gorgon said.

Or that they never find whats here, another echo added, one that Dallion hadnt seen.

All in all, there were about eight different types of echoes. Three Dallion recognized. The rest were complete unknowns. Dallion could only assume that these belonged to hunters still alive. As Eury had told him, some hunters tended to retire to move on to more important cities, potentially the imperial capital itself.

Im not interested in your missions, Dallion kept on pressing. Just one that he paused for a moment. No, Im interested in all missions dealing with phoenix hunts.

The comment made several of the echoes stir. Even so, they didnt move from their spots, or release the weapon they were holding. Dallion wasnt the only one with a ranged weapon.



There was no telling what all this was. Dallion had hoped that the guardian of the book would be able to give him a few answers. If he were to guess, the hunters must have left their echoes here to protect the information. That would mean there was a lot more in the tomes. Judging by the echoes he knew, only the top tier hunters were present. The unknown probably had held a similar position as either here or in some other city. If Vela ever decided to check on the old tomes, Dallion would probably get in trouble. The transition back to the real world would have to be perfect so that the fury didn't suspect anything. On the plus side, it didn't seem that any of the echoes recognized him.

Nil, didn't one need magic to create an autonomous echo? Dallion asked.

*Indeed, one did. However, that's not to say that the magic has to be theirs. There are devices to do this.*

*Magic quills?*

*In a crude, oversimplified way, yes. Granted, you might be the first to question guardians, but their point here is different. The echoes aren't here just to protect the details; they are the details.*

A living snippet of information. Dallion looked at the echoes again. It was quite clever in a somewhat ominous way.

*Now you understand why kaleidervistos were so difficult to get. Every noble and important organization wants one. Even during the artifact flood a few years back, there's always more demand than availability.*

Why? one of the echoes asked.

Don't you know who I am? Dallion asked, just to check whether his theory was true.

The new prime hunter? someone asked.

No, Dallion replied, despite the temptation. I'm

The echoes raised their dartbows at Dallion. Bolts filled the air as the attack resumed. Dallion burst into a hundred of instances.

Shield! he ordered.

The armadil shield extended, blocking several of the bolts. Red rectangles appeared in front of several instances.

Dallion fired a bolt of his own. For a moment, he regretted doing so. When the bolt was deflected by the echo he was aiming at, he felt both relief and regret. According to his judgment, the level of the echoes present wasn't too far off from his own. Killing them, though, would also remove the information he required.

Nox, don't attack! Dallion shouted.

With a snarl, the crackling leapt into the air, disappearing in the process.

Lux, let me down.

Are you sure, boss? The firebird asked. Bolts were flying left and right, striking more and more instances.

Lux! Dallion ordered.

The blue flames disappeared, allowing Dallion to land on the floor. That was a bad tactical decision, but the only one in which he could guarantee achieving what was needed. Aided by instances, he danced through the first bout of bolts, managing to complete a full guard sequence, even if he had to force split in order to do so. From there on, things became easier. The attacks became slower and slower until at one point they stopped altogether.

### **ESCAPE TRIGGERED**

**If you wish to escape combat, smash the window.**

A green rectangle appeared. It had been a while since Dallion had resorted to that. Seeing it felt almost nostalgic.

Nox, challenge the guardian, he said.

Have you made up your mind? The crackling didnt sound pleasant at all pleased.

We need the echoes alive.

### **GUARDIAN CHALLENGE**

**Nox has challenged the guardian of BOOK on your behalf.**

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

Looking at the new blue rectangle, Dallion unsummoned his dartblade, switching it for his harpsisword instead. He had never fought a level seven book guardian, but something told him it might be a bit trickier than he thought.

For several moments, nothing happened. Then, the floor a foot away from Dallian rose up, forming a caterpillar composed of thousands of pages of paper.

### **BOOK GUARDIAN**

**Species: MILLIPAGE**

**Class: Paper**

**Health: 100%**

**Traits:**

- **Body 10**
- **Mind 25**
- **Perception 15**
- **Reaction 30**

**Skills:**

- **Attack**
- **Guard**
- **Split (Species unique)**
- **Cut (Species unique)**

That was it? Dallion wondered.

Based on the traits, the battle was virtually over. There was no way such a weak guardian would stand a chance. On the other hand, the same had been said about him on numerous occasions and he had ended up winning.

Do you have dominion over the echoes? Dallion asked.

No. The guardian ruffled its pages.

Dallion didnt have to see the emotions within the creature to know it was lying. Whoever defeated the guardian became the owner of the item, and while the echoes were added separately, they were linked to the realm. They werent going to like it, but at least would be obliged to respond to his inquiries. At least that was the hope.

Do you surrender?

**COMBAT INITIATED****Chapter 587: Thousand Greatest Hits**

The guardian extended like a whip blade, filling a large part of the room. The echoesso aggressive only moments ago leaped out of the way, avoiding any damage. Judging by their actions and the occasional bolt theyd shoot at Dallion, it was obvious that they composed one team. This was the first time that Dallion had fought against a party composed of echoes and a guardian. The combination was unusual, though considering everything else unusual about the tome, he couldnt say he was surprised.

Out of the hundred instances Dallion maintained, eighty were in a permanent state of getting killed, leaving him twenty realities to choose from. It was clear that he would have to spend more time training the basics if he wanted to grow stronger. Having eighty percent of his instances killed was the equivalent of winning one battle out of five.

Pages sharp as razors skimmed past, striding everything they touched similar to a curling. In a few of his instances, Dallion used the armadil shield to protect himself. Thankfully, there were no serious consequences. As sharp as the parts of the guardian were, they didnt have the properties of a crackling.

While Dallion was doing his best to block the millipages attacks, Nox leapt, clawing through the creature in halt. Deep black cracks formed on the spine of the caterpillars back. There was a loud crack, after which half of the guardian broke off, falling to the ground. Unfortunately, things didnt end there. Moments later, the second half of the guardian sprang to life, starting an attack pattern of his own.

Damn it! Dallion thought. Thats what splitting meant! He had mistaken it to be combat splitting, but it wasnt. Against such an enemy, indiscriminate line attacks werent going to work.

Nox, get back! Dallion ordered. Dont attack it!

Barely half a dozen of Dallions instances were safe now. The entire space was filled with green cones, marking the danger areas. Dallion had to combine several skills to remain safe. At this point, it was no longer possible to use his guard skill bonusthere wasnt enough space for him to complete a full guard sequence. The only option was to do what Veil would have done: go on an all-out attack.

Attaching the armadil shield to his back, Dallion summoned his hammer, slamming the side of the guardian with all his strength.

### **AGGRAVATED STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 100%**

One of the guardians slammed into the wall behind. Blunt attacks were clearly useful, although Dallion had hoped to do a lot more with that hit. Despite its weak traits, the creature was capable of defending itself quite well.

The second guardian darted at Dallion, spinning as it did. Pages of paper flew everywhere, each as sharp as a blade. In a single action, all but two of Dallions instances were shredded to bits. The echoes, too, switched from attacking Dallion to protecting themselves in order to avoid an onslaught.

Pulled back by Lux, Dallion heaved the hammer right at the guardians head.

### **CRITICAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

### **MODERATE WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 20%**

A pair of rectangles emerged.

What the heck? Dallion wondered. Using one of his instances, he looked down at his body. There was a page sticking out of his thigh. It didnt hurt; if it wasnt for the rectangle, Dallion never would have known that hed been wounded. That didnt make things better.

### **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

This time the pain was noticeable, coming from the wound itself. Without a second thought, Dallion pulled the sheet of paper out. His flesh ripped as it did, as if the page had turned into a series of arrowheads.

Seen anything like this before? Dallion asked as he summed his thread splitter and slashed the page in two. There didnt seem to be any changes.

This is a generally common book guardian, the echo replied. This one just happens to be a bit more advanced. Its just a guess, but I would venture that several prime hunters have defeated it to establish control. Either that or there have been that many successful invasions.

Dallion summoned his hammer again, then threw it at the nearest guardian. The millipage rolled in a ball, deflecting the strike without any damage. At the same time, the other guardian extended in the direction of Dallion.

Changing weapons again, he summoned the dartblade and shot two bolts from almost point-blank range. Both bounced off, although the creature did guardian stop.

Dallion tried to fly to the nearest wall, but the moment he got close, a trio of echoes attacked him, destroying all instances that came anywhere close.

Gleam! Dallion ordered. Deal with one of the guardians.

The shardfly emerged, flying directly at its target. Several sets of wings cut into the page as she clashed into the millipage, filling the air with sparks. No rectangles appeared.

Arts, acrobatics, athletics, attack, Dallion thought as he spun in the air, evading the dozens of pages that flew in his direction. For seconds he slashed them with the thread cutter, letting the guardian come closer and closer. When the creature was a foot away, Dallion summoned his hammer and then performed a point attack right in the nose of the millipage.

The force of the attack passed through the guardian like a wave. Pages shot out in clusters like the stages of a controlled explosion. Similar to large confetti, they blocked the view in all directions.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

There was a time when Dallion would have considered that a good thing. Thankfully, he had grown much wiser since then. The fact that the pages remained pages and hadnt faded away into nothingness made it clear that the guardian was still alive. More importantly, it also meant that the pages were still alive as well.

Careful! he shouted, slashing as many of the pages as he could. However, for every three that he managed to destroy, one managed to cut him, causing a minor wound.

Death by a thousand cuts was a metaphor Dallion remembered from his time back on earth. Here, it was the exact thing. Sensing blood, the pages flew towards him like a shoal of piranhas, dealing as much inflicting damage at a greater rate that Lux could restore. Dallions health steadily decreased as he became surrounded by a wall of paper.

Fighting a book was unlike anything he had experienced before. Rather, the closest thing he could think of was fighting a flutter of shardflies. The characteristics of those creatures were similar,

although when facing them, Dallion was in the open and able to use his mass attacks. Doing so here risked destroying the very information he had come to gather.

Multiattack, Dallion thought. With dartblade and threat splitter he let out a series of attacks, piercing everything in vicinity. To be more effective, he also used the bonuses of his reaction trait, doubling his actions.

## **THOUSAND GREATEST HITS**

**(+2 Reaction)**

**Doing a thousand sequential hits is always a good strategy. Just make sure you dont receive a thousand sequential wounds.**

A blue rectangle emerged, momentarily blocking his view. Several dozen pages took advantage, attacking from his blind spot. His health was down to half. Combining acrobatics and attack, Dallion twisted in the air, using his legs to kick away as many of the pages as possible. In times like this he regretted not having blades on his boots.

Uh oh, he heard Gleam say.

What happened? Dallions heart skipped a beat. Did you kill an echo?

*The echoes are fine, annoying as they are. I sliced up the guardian.*

Having all echoes intact was a relief, although having a guardian sliced up was concerning, especially given the phrasing the familiar had used.

Dallion concentrated. For a split-second time seemed to freeze, as he evaluated the situation, calculating the optimal motion to deal with the pages surrounding him. Line attacks were out of the question, however, point attacks werent especially if he aimed directed one straight up.

Fastening his group round the handle of the threat cutter, Dallion did the attack. A point of pierce shot up through dozens of layers of paper, creating a wide opening.

Lux didnt need any orders, thrusting Dallion up to momentary safety. To be doubly sure, Dallion let go of his dartblade and summoned his hammer, which he threw straight down. Blunt attacks couldnt do much damage against paper, but they were enough to slow the flock of pages from going after him immediately. At that point, he saw them: the guardians that Gleam had created. There were a dozen of them, all small snippets of what the guardian had been. Nox had stepped on one with his paw. Dallion could see cracks seeping through the millipage, causing pages to crumble off. It was safe to say that at least one guardian had been dealt with. However, that left eleven more.

*Nox, Gleam, get back here!*

The familiars obeyed. As they leaped back up towards their owner, the multitude of pages flew back down. Like insects, then flew into the guardians, sliding in until their size doubled.

Three down, twelve to go, Dallion thought.

On the positive side, at least there appeared to be a finite number of pages. That made things quite easy. At Dallions present level, it would be a while before hed be out of stamina. The greatest

danger was receiving more damage than his firebird could restore. The second greatest that he'd split up and destroy one of the echoes, possibly the one he needed.

It's over, he said, adding a sensation of helplessness in his words through his music skill. You had your chance. I'll keep cutting you up until there's nothing left. You know I have the stamina to do it. Better give up and avoid the pain.

There was no response.

I'm not here to harm you. As I said, I just want to learn about a specific mission.

Not to stop you, dear boy, but you're fighting books, Nil said. Book guardians are immune to music.

Of course, they would be, Dallion thought.

The guardian apparently was of a similar opinion, for all its parts gathered together. Like a rat king, the tails of all the caterpillars merged, creating a cross between a snake and a hydra.

Out of habit, Dallion summoned his hammer and threw it down again. Two of the guardian's heads grabbed the instrument midair, before it could cause any damage. The guardian was much faster at learning than most Dallion had seen. That only meant that he had to win on this go. Getting ejected and returning would put him at an even greater disadvantage.

Ready, Nox? Dallion asked. It'll be like old times, just with a bit of a challenge.

The crackling purred.

*Gleam, you'll be defense. If it tries a page attack again, you deal with it.*

*It's annoying constantly dealing with your trash.*

*I know. I promise to find a way to level you up.*

The promise appeased the shardfly who fluttered to Dallion's head.

Six of the eleven heads of the guardian pulled back, shrinking to half their size. Many of the pages bent, forming layers of scales. From here on, it was all a matter of tactics, rather than brute strength.

*Nox, here's the plan. I'll separate the heads and you finish them off.*

Sounds like fun, the cracklings replied.

*Just don't attack the last one. I'll need that alive.*

Splitting into instances again, Dallion flew down at the guardian. The creature pulled back. Its six contracted heads shot up, extending as they did.

Shield! Dallion thought as he turned around. The armadil shield extended, protecting Dallion's entire torso. Several of the heads slammed right in. One managed to move to the side just in time to escape, though not for long. Dallion was counting on this. As the paper caterpillar passed by on the side, he performed a slash with his thread cutter. The hardened pages were little to stop

the lethally sharpened blade. While it didn't have the strength to cut through them, the weapon slit along them up to the smallest of cracks, then continued in like a paper knife through an envelope.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

One of the guardians heads was instantly severed. Immediately, Nox emerged, leaping off Dallion's shoulders and onto the head.

That's one, Dallion said.

## **Chapter 588: The Real Phoenix Mission**

Another millipage segment fell off, only to be devoured by Nox. The panther had an elegant way of going about things. Its teeth never touched a single page of the guardian, nor did it even claw on them. Instead, it would burst into half a dozen kitten forms of itself, each kneading into various parts of the creature. Cracks could cut in from multiple parts, quickly reducing the guardian into a ball of confetti. Then, after the creature had completely crumbled to bits, Nox would reassemble again and wait for the next target.

His effectiveness had earned him a wave of praise from Lux, which was nothing new, and even a few good words from Gleam. The latter acknowledgement was a lot more valued. The shardfly had taken the role of the big sister among the familiars and with good reason too. While she wasn't the one attacking, she was successfully stopping hundreds of razor-sharp pages of paper from slicing Dallion up. Even so, there were a few that bled through. One of them had even severed Dallion's right hand, making combat a lot more difficult. As Nil liked to remind, there were many ways of losing a battle and level was only but a factor determining the winner.

How much health do you have? Dallion shouted as he flew at what was left of the millipage.

The creature had reshuffled again, transforming into a trio of paper caterpillars, each twisting around the rest. Its length had visibly reduced, but not to the amount Dallion was hoping. For all intents and purposes, the fight was still in its mid-phase. The echoes that kept shooting or throwing weapons at Dallion didn't make things easier. Thankfully, the air battle also prevented them from going all out of fear they might hit the guardian they were allied to.

Targeting markers covered the sides of the guardian segments. Having fought the creature for over ten minutes, Dallion knew some of its weak spots. Unfortunately, the guardian knew his. Aware that it cannot defeat the intruder in a direct match, it kept aiming at his hands. At the moment, it was halfway to victory; while Lux persistently kept Dallion's health to maximum, the firebird couldn't heal a severed limb. As far as the realm was concerned, Dallion was going to have to win, or lose, without it.

Splitting into instances, Dallion slashed at a dozen of the target markers. In half of the attempts, the thread splitter sliced into the guardian. Of those, only two didn't result in injuries. The guardian had gotten quite sneaky in countering attacks. Since it was difficult to get anything through Gleam, it took advantage of Dallion's attacks to cut his hand off.

## **CRITICAL STRIKE**



### **Dealt damage is increased by 200%**

Nox, Dallion said, as another segment was split off. The rest merged back into the main body of the millipage.

The crackling leapt to its target. This was small enough not to require Nox to break up into more of himself. The result was no different.

Why does it keep fighting? Dallion wondered. I offered it to surrender.

Would you want a guardian that surrenders at the first sign of danger? Nil asked. Guardians share the characteristics of the purpose they were created. Thats what separates an apprentice from a master.

So, youre telling me that Im crap at forging. Dallion attempted another series of strikes, but the guardian moved too fast, leaving a trail of pages as a shield behind him.

*For the most part. As with most things, you still dont put in all your effort unless you really have to. The pieces of armor and all those trivial items you made to increase your forging skill, you couldnt care less what the guardians turned out to be. The hammer, on the other hand. There you put in a lot of effort, and we can see the result. You got Onda.*

There was no denying the fact. All guardians of the trivial were creatures. It was only when making the hammer that an actual banished race guardian had emerged.

Whoever had created the books used for the hunters record tomes had clearly put in a lot of effort, and one of the core rules was that only those strong enough were allowed to take advantage of the information contained there. It sounded like a typical thing a hunter would do.

Lacking most of its pages, the guardian merged into one again, as it had been at the beginning. No longer aggressive as before, it was relying on the echoes to create an opening in Dallions defense, for it to take advantage of.

Dallion noticed this, bursting into instances again. Only this time, he did a bit more. Of his hundred instances, in several, he went directly beneath the guardian. Once that happened, he took a deep breath and performed a point attack with his thread splitter.

### **FATAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 500%**

The entire millipage popped like an egg in a microwave, sending pages of paper in all directions. Both Gleam and Dallion filled the air with slashes, slicing up as many of the paper pages as they could.

The seconds felt like minutes. For a moment Dallion felt completely overwhelmed as red rectangles stacked in front of him. Half informed him that his health had been reduced, while the other half showed it being restored back again.

Finally, it was all over.

**BOOK Level increased**

**The BOOK has been improved to LEATHER.**

**Your ART skills have increased to 18.**

That was a bit close, dear boy, Nil said.

Dallion was fully aware. For a brief moment, his health had fallen down to fifteen percent before jumping back up thanks to Lux. As much as he wanted to claim this as a clear victory, he couldn't. If they had been on equal ground, he would have lost outright, while also being clearly superior. Both his traits and skills vastly outmatched his opponent. It was the restrictions of the environment that had hindered him a fact that he was wise to remember. In the wilderness, it had always been Dallion, who had chosen the best terrain for a battle. In the realms, that privilege was given to the hunted, and the guardians were taking advantage of it more and more. After all, there was a reason that hunters preferred to fight in the real world. As much as nobles and sheltered awakened were mocked, they had a far greater advantage in the realm that was the arena they were suited for.

A flash of bright light blinded Dallion for a second. Once he could see again, he was back in the chamber. The major difference was that this time he could see all of the echoes, and none of them had any ill emotions towards him. Of course, that wasn't to say that they liked him; they had merely acknowledged his strength.

You're wasteful in your actions, the guardian emerged from the ceiling. The caterpillar-like creature seemed a lot browner than before, its pages now made of fine leather with sharp metal edges. But still strong enough.

Thanks, Dallion replied, unsure how to respond. Guardians didn't often praise others. I still need the information.

You can ask them directly, the millipage said. You're the owner of the realm now.

I'm looking for any information about phoenix hunts, Dallion said loudly, addressing the echoes below. Specifically, the missions of a hunter that mentored otherworlders. He paused for a moment. A fury and a gorgon.

You're wasting your time, one of the Vela echoes said. No one here has gone on a phoenix hunt.

How's that possible? Most hunters

The aetherbird doesn't stay in the same place for long, another echo said. The last time it appeared in Nerosal, a group was selected to hunt it. One person filled in the entry. That person is dead and the echo went with him.

That's not what I was told. I heard that

We heard what you were told. The fury lied to you.

Not lied exactly, a Vela clarified. Sooner or later every hunter goes on a phoenix hunt. Most of those are false hunts. People are sent out to a place, hoping to get lucky. It's like a big game for the nobles. People bet on who will actually see it, who might find a feather, who will get to keep it and so on. That's nothing to do with a real hunt.

Dallions eyes narrowed.

Tell me about the real hunt, he said.

There was one thirteen years ago, an echo of the gorgon said. It was done by the person you suspect. In fact, it was at that time he noticed the Eury and Jiroh.

That was too far back for Diroh to have been involved. The girl was probably five at most back then, and living with her fury parents, or at least that was the story. Interestingly enough, Dallion didnt imagine that a hunt would be the reason Eury and Jiroh would start on the hunters path.

He saw promise, so he started training them, first in secret, then in the open.

Did he find the phoenix? Dallion asked.

Yes, a Vela said. He claimed that he did, and Im inclined to believe him. He must have failed to catch it, for his name was erased.

That seems to happen a lot in this world.

Yes, but hes the only person who had his name erased twice.

Twice? Dallion blinked. Technically, there was no reason for it not to happen. Given how long people lived without their initial names, there was every chance for someone to mess up and suffer the same fate. Hearing it actually done, though, was disturbing, to say the least. If Dallion was prone to conspiracies, hed say that the second erasure had been done, only to remove his name from all records or conversations.

Shortly before his death, Vela said. When working with nobles, its inevitable that hunters get burned. The question is how much. Whatever he did, it must have upset someone with power considerably.

Nil, if erasing is that common, why hasnt my name been erased? Dallion asked.

*Its all based on the balance of power. As much as some people would want to erase your name, there would be others whod be against it. It has nothing to do with the person, of course, but the political outcome. A bard that mocks will be hated by a noble, but supported by ten others. Just because something is easy doesnt mean its smart. The countess could have erased your name after the festival fiasco. However, the Archduke would have preferred that news of her shame be well known. Now, its the Archduke who might want to erase your name, but that would make him appear weak, since the countess has openly backed you. As I told you, its nothing but a big game. A game of nobility.*

Where did the hunt take place? Dallion asked.

Thats something that wasnt shared, an echo replied. It might have been in this province, it might have been outside of the empire. Only the original hunting party would know, but theyre all dead.

Thats not ominous at all, Dallion thought. Two things were starting to become clear. The phoenix was one of the best guarded secrets in this world, and the

countess hadn't hired him to succeed. As far as she was concerned, it didn't matter whether he failed or succeeded. The only interest she had was for him to survive long enough to cause as much ripples on the political scene as possible. It was looking as if in the end he'd either end up dead or have his name erased.

If there's anyone who might know, it's his apprentices, an echo of Vela added. He definitely didn't tell me anything more.

Thanks. Dallion nodded.

In the end, it had come to that. It was possible that hunter dens in other provinces had more information, but that was a long shot. The alternative was to talk with his trainees, which, with Jiroh gone, meant Eury even if she didn't like talking on the topic.

Why was his hunt a true hunt? he went on. Did he just get lucky?

No, the gorgon echo replied. His hunting party was told exactly where to go.

#### Chapter 589: Old Friend

Returning to the real world after a battle never was easy. Even with extreme concentration, Dallion felt the shift like a wave going through him. The most difficult thing was the look in the eyes. Shifting reality always made a person's pupils change slightly. Experienced awakened had the knowledge and perception to notice such a subtle change. The only way to hide it was through extreme concentration. Strictly speaking, there was another approach, though it was a lot less dignified.

The moment Dallion returned to the hunter's den, he blinked.

Any other missions before that? Dallion asked.

Go ahead and ask Hawk, the fury said, amused. He's the only one who's old enough to know.

Didn't know the dens been here for that long, Dallion said casually flipping through the pages.

It's not, Vela said from the entrance.

Splitting into three instances, Dallion looked over his shoulder. The woman was indeed there, along with a dwarf. It was slightly alarming that Dallion hadn't heard any of them approach. Then again, the fury had made quite enough noise to mask anything. As tempting as it was to think this was a conspiracy, though, there was a far greater chance that the prime hunter had only just arrived.

What's he doing? she gave the fury a glance of disapproval.

Going through the records, the hunter replied with a shrug. It's not forbidden.

The dwarf grunted. Without a single word, Vela made it clear that she didn't approve of such behavior. Within moments, the tomes rose up into the air, then floated back to where they had been. Only the book Dallion was holding remained.

The den hasn't been hired to help in your hunt, Vela said firmly.

I guess I can't keep this, then? Dallion held up the tome. The silence suggested that it wasn't a good idea to keep pushing. When will Eury be back?

Goodbye, Dal. Vela crossed her arms.

That settled it. With a nod, Dallion walked past, making his way to the door. Hed already gotten all the information he could from the den. Or had he? Dallion didnt let go of the door as he closed it, instead, he went to have a final chat.

## **AREA AWAKENING**

I knew youd pass by, Hawk said as Dallion entered his realm. The copyette had taken the form of a person he had never seen. Something suggested that it might be the hunter he was searching for.

The man was quite ordinary. Muscular, though not overly, he had short brown hair, a sparse beard, and the most common of travel gear. Looking at him, he could pass for anything from a mercenary to a semi-awakened on his way to a big city.

Thats him? Dallion asked.

Yep. I cant tell you any specifics, though. Moon vow.

Never leave the den without one. Dallion sighed. Can you tell me if anyone else has been on phoenix hunts?

You know they have. The copyette smiled. So much for that approach.

Wheres Eury?

That is another matter entirely. Shes on a rather boring mission involving ruin hunting.

Ruin hunting was the extremely annoying mission of hunting creatures that chose ruins as lairs. Predominantly magic, they were creatures that lived in the wilderness without being part of it. As such, they preferred to find places that gave them good protection from both people and Starspawn. Some of Dallions earliest missions involved ruin hunting, way back even before he was an unofficial apprentice.

Griffin hunting? he asked.

Not exactly. No one would pay an elite hunter just for griffins.

They used to.

Things have changed. The poison plague killed a lot, nobles especially. Only big boys get the attention or, in this case, a hatcher wyvern.

The name was enough to convey the difficulty of the mission. Dallion had never seen wyverns, although hed read about them in the bestiary tome he had. At some point, three eras ago, they were supposedly flock animals moving about the skies and getting into fights with cloud creatures. The dryads even used them during the wars as combat units. Since then, most of them had died out. The few that remained preferred to be left alone, and were highly irritable to anyone who came close.

Where? Dallion asked.

The request was from Calum province, the capital, to be more precise.

That made things somewhat more complicated. With Countess Priscord spreading news of Dallions hunt, there probably wasnt anyone in the empire who didnt know. Hopefully, the nobles in the other provinces hadnt taken a side just yet.

Thanks, Hawk.

You owe me one, Dal. Next time, stop by for a longer chat.

Sure.

That was quite optimistic on the guardians side. Apparently, he was of the opinion that Dallion was going to survive through this. Either that, or he gambled that Dallion would pass through Linatol at least once more before his death.

Leaving the realm, Dallion walked away from the building. After several steps, he split into thirty instances, each moving about cautiously. Thankfully, no attack followed. Whoever had tried the previous time was content with just sending a message.

Dallion went out of the city as quickly as possible. All the food was bought on the way at exorbitant prices. For the same amount of money, he could have gotten three times as much back in Nerosal, not to mention a lot more from the smaller towns and villages on the way. Money at this point was irrelevant, though. The main focus was for him to survive and follow the trail he has set out on.

There was no official border between provinces. With the conflict between nobles, there rarely was a single person to have complete dominion over the area domain. Rather, the nobles were in control of their small bubbles of safety within the vast wilderness. It was claimed that the archdukes had full control of the provincial area, just as the emperor had direct control over the entire empire, but Dallion was starting to have his doubts. Based on the way everyone had behaved during the days of the poison plague, settlements were key; everything else was just space on a map.

Based on personal experience, even with good intel, it usually took a few weeks for a hunter to find the layer of a specific dungeon creature. Even nesting ones often changed location, either being chased out by a stronger creature, or in turn finding a better location to chase someone else out. Since Dallions knowledge of Calum Province was limited, he had to purchase the information from traders on stops along the way. It wasnt the best experience, but after some haggling, and use of music skills, Dallion managed to obtain what he wanted. Even better, for a small additional fee, he also managed to learn the task that Eury had taken.

The eldest son of Count Kereel, had apparently expressed the desire to add a wyverns nest in his father's city. The idea sounded rather stupid, but as the hunter motto went, a hunter was not the one to stop clients thrown away money. Most probably, the noble had read a bit too many historical recreations and wanted to create an army of wyverns to impress others. Given that officially there werent any empaths in the world, Dallion assumed that a mage had also been hired to ensure the creatures obedience. That made him sad.

The city of Kereel was a significant distance away. Even now, Dallion couldnt be sure whether Eury had finished her mission or was still searching. Either way, he was going to need some help to find her on time.

You really should exchange echoes, Nil grumbled. At the very least, leave one of yours in one of her items. That way, shed at least know youre looking for her.

You know her thoughts on that, Dallion said, though in his mind he agreed. If he had an echo of Eury, hed already have the information. Then again, if that was

the case, he most likely wouldnt have gone to the hunters den in Linatol, but had her check for him.

*Sooner or later, youll have to get past your superstitions. The sooner the better. Otherwise, youll always be at a disadvantage, dear boy.*

*Maybe youre right. Until then, I have other advantages I can use.*

Once he was in the wilderness and fairly certain that there wasnt anyone around, Dallion waited for nightfall. Then, when the Green Moon became visible in the sky, he made his request. It wasnt a boon, not even a favor, but rather something that was easy to obtain. Less than a few minutes later, as he was sitting on the ground, Dallion was forced into one of his instances.

The action caught him by surprise, but didnt frighten him particularly. If anything, he expected such a turn of events. In reaction, all he did was to draw his whip blade and stop splitting.

A tiny green dot appeared in the darkness in the background of the Green Moon. With time, it grew larger and larger until the outline of a dragon became visible.

As the dragon approached, it split into a dozen of instances, each soaring towards Dallion along a different path.

He seems to have grown a bit, Nil commented. Last time, he was only slightly bigger than a horse.

Those must have been some pretty large horses, Dallion laughed. But even if he had, there were some things that didnt change.

When the dragon was ten feet away, Dallion split into fifty instances, several of which leapt into the air. The dragon tried to force a specific instance of Dallion to become reality, but Dallion was stronger, forcing his version of events to unfold. After another second, all of the dragons instances had vanished, except for the one landing on the ground. Meanwhile, Dallion was still able to maintain his fifty instances.

Nice try, Dallion said, several of his instances walking by the massive creature while stroking its scales. Youve gotten a bit better, and a lot bigger.

Very funny! The dragon flapped its wings. Youve leveled up.

Thats what awakened do, Dallion replied, letting his instances fade away. How have you been, Dark?

Bored out of my skull! Felygn doesnt let me do anything. I just get to sit and watch and

You get to leave whenever you want. That's better than the realm of your father.

The dragon didnt respond. It hadnt been that long ago when Dallion had effectively rescued the creature from the realm of an ancient dragon at the Green Moons behest. Back then, Dark was but a dragonlet, living a boring, but safe life. Since escaping, he had grown quite a bit, becoming a full dragon, be it still a very young one. It would be centuries until it became the powerhouse described in bestiary and old poems. Until then, though, it had to spend most of its days in the realm of the Green Moon, safe from hunters and other monsters.

Are you in a condition to fight?

Who do you take me for? Of course, I am! Ive been leveling up like crazy! The dragon flicked its tail like a whip.

The whip blade extended, then shrunk again, in mocking fashion. Gleam was clearly unconvinced. The dragon could tell she was too, since he quickly stopped posing.

What are we up against? Dark asked. Mages?

Hopefully not. I need you to help me find Eury. Shes in some ruins in this province. It would have taken me too long to find her on my own.

Whats what you called me for? To carry you? Dont you have Lux for that?

This is the real world, Dark. Not everyone has your powers.

The dragon snarled.

Hey, dont feel too mad. Theres every chance therell be things to fight when we find her. Would I have called you otherwise? Dallion asked. That wasnt entirely true, though it did have enough to give the dragon some hope.

You sure?

Its very possible. Dallion patted the creature on the head. Trust me.

Chapter 590: Nest Hunting

Wyverns poured up into the sky like water, all erupting from a hole in the ground. The creatures swirled round, clearing a swarm that could be seen and heard for thousands of miles. None of them were particularly pleased with the surroundings they were given, while simultaneously uncertain in which direction to go. The only thing certain was that they were territorial enough to attack anything they considered infringing in their territory, especially creatures that were in the sky, such as dragons.

Dont worry about the creatures, Dallion said. Just fly towards the ruins.

What ruins?! Dark snapped. As a dragon he had pretty good perception, but even so, there didnt seem to be any structure in sight, nothing but stony wilderness, deprived even of plants.

Go to the hole they are flying out from. The ruins are buried underneath.

This wasnt the way Dallion hoped hed find Eury. Thanks to the dragon, it had taken him less than a day to reach Kereel. From there, the plan was to seek out the local hunters, and learn of the locations with a high likelihood of nesting wyverns. It had never come to that. Even before entering the city itself, Dallion had caught wind of talk of wyverns spotted in the western skies. That didnt sound like a coincidence. After checking it out, it turned out that his suspicions were right.

In less than a few hours' flight, Dallion and the dragon spotted infant wyvern corpses on the ground. The creatures hadnt been dead longprobably a week or two at most. They had died from hunger and exhaustion. Thats how it began.

Dark flapped his wings creating a wave of air around him. The dragon had learned a few new tricks in his absence. As impressive as they seemed they werent especially efficient when it came to actual



combat. The force pushed the wyverns back, dazing some of them for a few moments. That was enough for Dallion to do a three-sixty line attack

Dozens severed in two creatures fell to the ground. It wasn't a pleasant sight, sadly there was no other choice. The wyverns were too young to be reasoned with, driven purely by instinct, they attacked anything in the vicinity.

Head down, Dallion ordered, splitting into instances.

Aware of the difficulty of the task the dragon split as well. Dozens of instances of it headed towards the source of the wyverns. When it got relatively close, Dallion did a point attack with his hammer.

The destructive force slammed into the ascending wyverns pushing them back down. There was a loud dull thud, after which everything suddenly calmed down. No more creatures emerged from below. Only the ones already in the sky remained, dispersing in all directions.

Dark let himself glide for a few moments, before taking on the inertia to swoop back up towards the sky.

Don't chase them, Dallion said. Just land.

Don't we have to finish them off?

They'll die off on their own. Infants don't last long.

There were mixed feelings on the matter. On the one hand, the wyverns had been affected by the Star, probably by spawn that had taken them in. On the other they still were living creatures. This was one time Dallion wished he was part of the order. Maybe then he'd have the ability to somehow bless and purify the creatures to what they originally were supposed to be. A while back, he had managed to help a human transform back from a chainling. It wasn't an easy task and mostly due to luck and assistance rather than actual skill on his part. Since then, though, he hadn't managed to replicate the success.

Think Eury is fine? Dark asked, as Dallion dismounted.

If she were here I'd have known.

How?

Her gear would have told me. Dallion made his way to the opening. It was as dark as a tar pit. Listening carefully, Dallion could hear faint scurrying deep below. Some of the wyverns had survived, though it didn't sound like they were a threat. Stay here. Dallion took out his dartblade. The flock might have attracted the attention of something. If it's too strong, fly away. I'll handle it.

The dragon flapped its wings. Taking that to be agreement, Dallion leapt down the tunnel.

Blue light surrounded the dartblade providing enough light for him to see. Soil gave way to stone, indicating, as Dallion suspected, that this was indeed a site of ruins. However, it was a quite small one. Landing with a squishing sound on a carpet of bodies, Dallion looked around. There were a total of three floors, all of them relatively small. From what he could assume this had been a mansion or garrison of some sort. The architecture looked human, so it probably was no older than a thousand years at most. Anything of importance was long gone, taken by hunters or the creatures that had taken over the ruin. Eggshells were attached to every surface Dallion could see: floor,

walls, and ceiling. Similar to the last few places that the wyvern bodies had led him too, this too had been used as a hatchery, and once again there was no trace of any parent.

Only familiar with wyvern basics, Dallion couldnt be certain if that was normal, or not. Ultimately, it didnt matter. Although affected by Starspawn, young wyverns werent strong enough to survive in the wilderness for long. Lacking food and protection in its early hours after hatching, they would likely just keep on flying, attacking anything in sight, regardless of strength, until they dropped due to hunger and exhaustion.

Someone hatched them prematurely, Vihrogon said. Same as last time.

I cant see any traces, Dallion said as he approached a wall.

The shell fragments had been smashed to bits making it impossible for him to determine the cause. That didnt prove anything, though. An alarming amount of creatures in the wilderness were released as a result of travelers, often awakened, stumbling onto something and attempting to make a tidy profit. Most often the people in question would escape and leave the mess for the imperial army or the local Archduke patrols to deal with. The Academy had that rather nasty habit, as Dallion had experienced first-hand. In this case, though, he didnt see any such evidence.

Looks natural to me, he thought. The hatcher must have gone through here, then moved to another layer, leaving the last batch of eggs behind.

*Youre right about that part, but not the hatching. Look at the shell fragments. The ones furthest from the opening were the first to hatch. If it was natural, they would have hatched at the same time.*

Dallion used his layer vision. In his mind lines formed, showing how the first wyverns had crashed into the eggs of those in front, creating a wave culminating in the eruption he had seen. Someone had planned this someone who had only a vague idea what they were doing. If Dallion were to guess, it looked like a patrol of local troops cleaning the familiar dungeons. If that were the case, they hadnt left any tracks.

A few wyverns coiled out of the shells, and screeched their way towards Dallion. Splitting into a dozen instances, just in case, he drew his whip blade and slashed at them. Sensing a chance to level up, Gleam extended the blade, twisting it so it stretched throughout the floor, piercing through five of the creatures. Once all of them stopped breathing, the blade contracted to its normal size again.

Any luck? Dallion asked, slashing in the air, to get the blood off.

No, Gleam said in a disappointing voice. Ill need to kill something more substantial.

*If we get to the hatcher, you might have the chance.*

The other floors were no different to the one Dallion had seen. Nothing but shells remained, following the same pattern as before. Whoever had done the cleanup, relied on the infant wyverns dying on their own. It was a lazy and reckless approach, since there as no way of knowing who would be passing through the area.

With a series of leaps along the walls of the hole, Dallion made his way back outside. The dragon was still there, looking at the sky in three instances, each of them as bored as the last.

Anything? It asked.

Another cleaned nest, Dallion said as he made his way to mount Dark again. We go on west.

How many of these do we need to go through until we find the right one?

Probably a few more, Dallion replied. There usually aren't that many nests. I doubt the wyvern could hold a large area of the wilderness.

With a short dash, the dragon leapt into the air, then flapped its wings to gain height. Once it did, he turned, continuing west. Meanwhile, Dallion concentrated, reaching out to any guardians he could. Other than all his items and gears, though, there was nothing else. Apparently, Eury was still a long way away.

Are you sur that shes on this side of the city, dear boy? Nil asked. If the wyverns are plaguing the area, they could have occupied all ruins in the province.

Its a good point to start, Dallion replied. For the money they're paying her I doubt there'd be other teams messing about with wyverns.

*Dont underestimate politics and stupidity, dear boy.*

After about ten minutes another flock of creatures became visible in the distance. Focusing in the direction, Dallion saw that they were wyvern infants, yet again. As he moved closer, though, he saw that there was that they were in far greater numbers.

Go towards them, Dallion said. Only fight those you have to.

I can take care of them, Gleam insisted.

Dallion hesitated. He had no doubt that the whip blade could slaughter them without issue. At their weakened state, they were no different than grass. Even so, he preferred having her close at hand, in case something else attacked. A good hunter never let his guard down. At the same time, those who knew when to take a chance were the ones gaining the big rewards.

Go for it, he said. Stay close.

The whip blade shot out, flying towards the thick of the swarm. While she did, the dragon swooped closer to the ground.

Seeing two enemies slightly confused the wyverns. For a few moments they screeched, uncertain which direction to go. The hesitation quickly ended when Gleam slashed at them, with the extended whip blade, slicing up several of them.

Anyone there? Dallion asked using his empathy trait to its limits. At its current value, he was supposed to be able to sense a guardian in tens of miles. Since leaving the city, there had been no response. To his surprise, this time, he finally got an answer.

Dal? a voice asked. Dallion instantly recognized the voice of Eurys left gauntlet. What are you doing here?

What do you think? Dallion could barely contain his joy. Where are you?

Bad timing, the gorgons other gauntlet said. Were surrounded by wyverns.

*I see them. Are you underground somewhere?*

*Were in a maze complex of some sort. Be careful, there are a lot of them here.*

Eurys having trouble against infants? Dallion asked, surprised. How many are there?

*A lot, and they arent infants. The place is crawling with the real thing. The stupid noble irked them and now theyre attacking from all sides.*

That was bad on several levels. That was why one of the golden rules for hunters was never to take clients along they always caused problems and expected the hunters to deal with them. The more alarming part was that there were full grown wyverns, as in more than one. Fighting infants was one thing; they were stupid, confused, with scales soft enough to be pierced by pretty much anything. The older species were covered in natural armor, not to mention they had a few special skills of their own, including the ability to breathe poison.