

## Leveling up 621

### Chapter 621: Dual Realm Invasion

Was that the major difference between magic and the Stars skills? All this time, Dallion thought the major part of it was the introduction of technology. It seemed that if that had been a concern, it was only a minor one. Artifacts of past ages still existed in the world. If they were so dangerous the Moons would have destroyed them, or at the very least had the Order do it for them. No, it was the void that presented the real danger the ability to create something out of something else.

Nil, is that true? Dallion asked.

Its difficult to say, the echo sighed. The Order seems to think so, along with a small number of mages. Most just have a good sense not to meddle with anything Star-related given the past history of events.

Ive been doing it all this time, Dallion thought.

Ever since the day he had saved the crackling cub back in the domain of the well, he had been meddling in void abilities. They hadnt seemed evil. One could say that they were even good they had helped him unseal the powers of his mother, not to mention they had helped him in the initial battle against the Star itself. There was no way they could be evil. And if they were, that would mean using Luxs healing ability had been the equivalent of vampirism?

Look out! A chorus of voices yelled in Dallions domain, all of them belonging to Harp.

The shout caused Dallion to react, breaking through the crippling doubt. It was like jumping through a thin layer of glass. For the slightest of instants, Dallion was able to see the spell fragments glitter in the void. In a way, it was like music, only instead of threads, he had been captured in a small box of emotions. That explained why Aether had been so talkative.

Beyond the depression spell, Dallion could see the elements of a far larger one, shooting rays of purple light straight at him. A few fractions of a second before they hit him, he managed to split into instances, moving away. It was that action that, in effect, saved him from being thrown out of the realm, though not without a price.

### **SHOCK EFFECT**

**Your movement has been reduced by 10% for two minutes**

**Attack effectiveness has been reduced by 50% for two minutes**

Two minutes as March used to say, in combat, that was the same as remaining in effect permanently. The aetherbird had outplayed him, using quite an intricate method. Even now, Dallion couldnt be certain whether the spell had started in the realm or back when hed met Aether for the first time. He wouldnt be surprised if it had occurred while observing the memory fragment. By all accounts, the fight seemed lost. Dallion had nothing left but to accept the result and hope someone else would be able to stop the creature from acting. However, he didnt. Having the depression spell removed felt like having a mountain off his chest. The only time he had felt anything remotely similar was back in his village, after destroying the limiting echo hidden within his realm. For the

brief period that followed, Dallion felt he could achieve anything. Now he was going through the same, only on overdrive.

Nox! he shouted as he summoned his hammer.

Twisting in the air, he weaved it in the direction of Aether. The aetherbird quickly changed location, appearing ten feet from the direction the hammer was flying. Even with Onda curving slightly, there was no way it would hit its target. That was never the goal. As the hammer passed by, Nox leapt at the aetherbird, claws extended. The proximity to the Moons familiar, made the crackling let off smoke, receiving a low dose of constant damage as it got near. The consequences of it classing with magic was going to cause substantial damage, though the same could be said for the aetherbird as well. The artifact Dallion had used to match everything to his level had done so, working in both directions: beings that were vastly more powerful than Dallion were capped to his level, while anyone weaker was boosted to up to level seventy. It didnt work on common guardiansDallions clothes and gear had remained unchangedbut it clearly had affected familiars. Dallion had suspected that ever since he felt the speed at which Lux had restored his health. Now, he had played his trump card.

A torrent of feathers flew towards the growing form of Nox. Like a hail of flaming bullets, they struck him, disappearing like pebbles in a swamp. Dozens of purple rectangles appeared, marking that the crackling was receiving minor damage, though by no means enough to stop him from flying forward. Looking at it, an observer would be hard pressed to say who would win the confrontation. The aetherbird had far more abilities and experience, but Nox had a lot more health to start with. Dallion didnt wait to find out.

Lux, boost me, he ordered.

Taking advantage of the aetherbirds hesitation, he thrust right at it.

Spark! he thought, letting go of the aethersword.

A faint white glow covered his right hand, barely visible beneath the blue flames. A split second later, he struck, grabbing Aethers right eye. It felt weird, like grabbing a piece of candy in the middle of a bowl of jelly. Sensing it touch the palm of his hand, Dallion tightened his grip, unwilling to let the fragment go.

## **REALM INVADED**

**The realm of AETHER is now your domain.**

The purple message emerged. Moments later, the massive form of Lux crashed into Dallion, quickly entering his realm. A low hiss suggested that the whole experience was painful.

## **REALM CONQUEROR**

**(+5 Mind)**

**Conquering realms is not encouraged, even if your skills are acknowledged. You can do better!**

You alright, Nox? Dallion asked, waking the rectangle away.

It hurts, the crackling replied.

Dallion could only imagine what it must have been like to go through fire just for the sake of a single attack, not to mention all the magic feathers hitting him.

Will you heal? There was a slight pause. Without killing anything?

*Ill try itll take a long while.*

*Thanks. Hang in there.*

That was another familiar Dallion wouldnt be able to use for a while.

A meadow appeared beneath Dallion. It extended into the distance like a painting being formed, creating bushes, trees, mountains, even the sky itself. Sensing its new owner, the realm adjusted accordingly.

It wont make a difference, an aetherbird landed a few feet from Dallion. Youre just delaying the inevitable.

Dallion stared at the creature in horror. Arms still shaking, he summoned his harpsisword.

Easy, youve already won, the aetherbird said, with slight annoyance. Havent you learned?

Youre an afterimage, Dallion said, but didnt lower his weapon. Magical afterimage.

The image was something that didnt exist. In a few minutes, another rectangle would appear and the bird would vanish in a cloud of glowing particles. Until then, it would remain here, chatting as if nothing had happened. The tricky part was that it could also fight back. Dallion wasnt sure whether ejecting someone who had conquered its domain wouldnt create a paradox, but he wasnt willing to take the chance.

What wont make a difference? Dallion pressed on.

The world, you, anything. Even if you cage me again, I wont stay trapped for long. And having your familiars use moderation wont change the fact that youre using void abilities. The Star used the same trick at firstwalking the line. Since it was devices that used the power of the void, and not the people themselves, there wasnt much the Moons could do. It was inevitable theyd cross the line. It just took them a few centuries. Aether flew to the other side of Dallion, still keeping his distance. The same will happen to you. A pity, but it always goes that way.

Youre wrong, Dallion thought. After this was over, hed go to the closest shrine of the Order and have a discussion with his Moon. Everything was going to be fine. All he had to do was not let himself get provoked.

You grabbed the brain, Aether said. Why?

Luck. Dallion lied.

No, you deliberately aimed for that.

A loud band sounded, causing the aetherbird to explode in a cloud of feathers. Dallion leapt to his feet, but another blast followed, hitting him in the leg.

## **CRITICAL WOUND**

**Your health has been decreased by 50%**

Pain shot throughout his body, causing him to drop his weapon. Lux managed to lift Dallion up in the sky, but there was no point. Dallion was almost out of stamina. Even if Lux restored the lost health almost instantly, he could barely make a normal attack, let alone anything requiring spark.

He did it because hes an idiot.

Arthurows descended from the sky. He appeared in a state far worse than Dallion. Half of his lower body was severed, replaced by every shifting black good. Given the amount of smoke that rose from it, this was a temporary measure quickly hatched up at the spur of the moment.

Double-barrel shotgun. The left corner of the Stars mouth curved up in a nasty smirk. One hit is all it takes. And youre in no state for splitting.

Calmly, the Star floated down to the ground. Bending down, he picked up a handful of feathers from the ground. Purple flames emerged, burning his fingers, but Arthurows didnt seem to care.

You had to go for the brain, he shook his head. The heart would have been enough. Youd have had what you wanted, enough to persuade the stupid countess to keep her promise. But no, you had to go for the skill. Annoying, but no huge loss. In fact, I suspected you might pull this off.

Blue flames propelled Dallion away from the Star, but hardly had he passed five feet, when another shot echoed, bringing his health to ten percent.

Dont run, The Star said calmly. I wont kill you. I still need you to give me what youve taken. Just give it now. You know youll do it sooner or later. Youve no idea how much pain I could inflict. Since were both from Earth, Id want to avoid that.

Boss, what do I do? Lux asked.

There was nothing he could do. The Star had the ability to fly, and even if he wasnt as fast as the firebird, he was going to catch up, eventually. Gritting his teeth, Dallion tried to leave the realm.

## **REALM INVASION IN PROGRESS**

**If you leave, youll lose all dominion over Aethers realm.**

**Do you want to proceed?**

A purple rectangle appeared.

That also works, the Star said. Youre not the only one who could invade a realm. Nice trick, isnt it? I was dying to tell you, but those pesky Moon rules. Dont you just hate them? Being only able to tell people who already know is the same as not telling them at all.

Dallion closed his eyes, desperately thinking of a way to get out of this. He didnt have the strength for another fight. The Star was in pretty bad shape as well, though still immeasurably better. Escape wasnt an option, either not unless he wanted the realm to fall in Arthurows hands.

Offer still stands, by the way. The Star taunted him. Just give me the thing youre holding and Ill owe you one. You can have everything youve dreamed about. Ill even give you the spellcraft gem once Im done with it. Sounds like a win-win to me.

In Dallions experience, whenever someone said that a thing was win-win, it usually meant that the win was for the one proposing the idea. Everyone else got a little less, and occasionally nothing at all.

Want to take your time? the Star asked. Sure. Ill wait. Its not like time matters here.

Dallion gritted his teeth. The Star was toying with. In a direct encounter, it was clear who would win. The only thing left to do was to find a way to deprive both sides of victory.

Pondering my demise? The Star laughed. Good. Everyone deserves a hobby. Ill

No, a voice said, a voice composed of multiple sounds merging to form words.

A nymph in full battle armor had appeared on the ground, holding a harpsiswordDallions harpsisword.

He doesnt have to, she said, leaping into the air in the direction of the Star.

#### Chapter 622: Skill Gem Prison

Trails of water droplets followed the nymphs blade. Larger than raindrops, they remained in the air for several seconds, before stretching like needles and darting in the direction of the Star. Barely any ever caused any actual harm, most sinking in the void matter that shifted to protect them, but she was pushing him back.

Watching her fight, one couldnt tell whether her level was seventy or seven hundred. All her actions were lethally precise, light, and elegant as a butterfly. In the past, Dallion had been impressed by the dancing combat of Euryale and the ruthless effectiveness of March. Harp put both of them to shame. The millennia of experience were apparent. She didnt combat split, nor did she rely on superior speed. If anything, her attacks seemed slow, almost sluggish compared to the Stars actions. And still, it was taking all the Stars effort to keep her from advancing.

Strategy, Dallion thought. Harp had played out so many moons in advance that she didnt need to be fast. No matter what the enemys response was, she had an answer. And to think I was planning to challenge her

Tendrils burst from the Star, only to be sliced up by Harps trail of water.

I thought she wasnt permitted to do that, Dallion thought.

She isnt, Nil replied.

*Why havent the Moons intervened?*

*Were within a magical realm, which at present belongs to you. Exceptions still hold true.*

This wasnt the first time the Moons hadnt intervened at moments when they clearly should have. Back when the Star had attempted to conquer Nerosal, a copyette had openly made his presence known. Technically, when acting, he wasnt in the real world, but anyone would know that he had to have gone through it to get where he did. The Moons had watched him engage in the fight and not

done a thing. Then again, they had watched the Moon try to have an entire city swallowed by the wilderness as well.

Three precise slashes and the lower part of the Stars body was cut cleanly off. The void matter attempted to reconnect, but the array of droplets constantly interfered, preventing it from closing the final inch.

A spark of anger flashed through Aethurows forehead. Eyes turned in the direction of Dallion. The moment they did, the harpsisword pierced his head. Void matter burst in all directions, like a water balloon. Affected by the magic of the realm, the splatter evaporated almost immediately, vanishing from sight.

You killed him? Dallion asked in disbelief.

No, the nymph replied, still in her full form.

He escaped before the sword could make contact, Nil explained. You couldnt possibly think that the Star would die to a guardian, dear boy. Even in this wretched state, hes got several means of escape. If he didn't, the Order or the emperor would have killed him centuries ago.

It was interesting that Nil was careful not to put the Academy in the group.

*Hes probably back where he came from. If I were to guess, he never was in the South to begin with.*

Was he hiding in my realm? Dallion asked.

The echo didnt answer immediately.

*Its highly unlikely. I would have sensed something, or Nox. The Crippled didnt exactly come alone. All those chianlings would have attracted enough attention.*

Everything stood to reason, or at least Dallion told himself so. However, in the back of his mind remained a seed of doubt he couldnt completely erase. It was indisputable that he had somehow brought the Star within this realm. The really scary part was that he could no longer be certain that the Star wasnt hiding there now. With Gleam missing and Lux and Vihrogon seriously injured, his realm wasnt as secure as usual. What stung the most was that he still wasnt able to handle the situation himself.

Dallion closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he was back on the top of the mountain. The Purple Moon was directly above him, shining in full strength, and it wasnt alone. All seven Moons were there. Were they here to observe, or to punish Dallion?

A small, hard object was in Dallions hand. Looking down, he saw that he was gripping a purple crystalthe skill gem of spellcraft. By all accounts, it wasnt supposed to exist, and in a way it didnt. The gem wasnt merely a gem; it was also Aether.

You can hear me, cant you? Dallion asked.

There was no reply.

Sorry about this. I wish it could have been different.

Dallion spent a few more minutes looking at the sky. Once he was done, he went inside the building complex ruins.

Come along, Ruby. He grabbed his backpack. Lets go.

The way back was a lot faster. Familiar with the route, there was no longer any need to guess which way to go. Furthermore, after everything he had just experienced, Dallion seemed to have lost any sense of fear. Burdened by an unfamiliar sense of emptiness, he made his way down to the subway tunnel, then started the way back.

Not once did he split while in the tunnel. Then again, he didnt have to. Any creatures felt the cold power emanating from him and quickly scurried away to safety.

Upon arriving at the opening leading outside the tunnel, Dallion didnt flinch. There was every chance that the spectral shardfly was still there, but that didnt bother him in the least.

I know youre here, he shouted. Try your luck if you want. I wont fight to capture this time.

Nothing but the wind sounded. That was good enough for Dallion, who calmly continued into the open. It took a while, but in the end, he managed to find the pieces of the whip blade. With the sung old corn snapped, the pieces had scattered throughout a relatively large area.

Ruby had offered to help in the search, but Dallion forbade him. He could feel the sorrow emanating from the creature as it was. Even now, the shardfly was trying to hide it, despite knowing that he couldnt.

Shed have been proud of you, Dallion said, gathering the last of the pieces.

Repairing the weapon wasnt going to be an issuehe had the skills and materials for that. As for Gleam herself, that was a different matter altogether. No one in Dallions realm was ready to give up on her, though they also knew that they had to.

The pieces felt lifeless in his hands. Without hurrying, Dallion carefully wrapped them in a piece of clothing, which he put in the backpack. Afterwards, he continued walking forward. Soon enough, he was back in the tunnels.

While he didnt feel the need to hide anymore, walking through the tunnels was the fastest way to leave the canyon. He had tried, of course, to get the Green Moon to send Dark to the area, but that never happened. Either the dragon was busy somewhere, or the Moon refused to let him go. Whatever the case, Dallion decided not to wait.

A journey of days now lasted weeks. On the way, few predators dared attack. Those that did were dispatched with extreme ease through a combination of combat splitting and half a dozen skills combined. After witnessing the beasts utter defeat, the rest reclassified Dallion as not-prey.

Halfway across the lands of the fallen south, the skill gem began talking to Dallion; rarely at first, then more and more, becoming accustomed to the situation. Regardless of how a conversation started, it always reached the same point.

Youll gain the skill, the voice of Aether said. Theres no other way in the world to gain it.

Dallion kept roasting his fish at the fire. It wasn't anything special, but enough to keep him fed, and he didn't want to waste time catching any of the big ones.

*Use the gem and we both win.*

And the rest of the world? Dallion tried a bite. The fish tasted slightly bitter, but at least it wasn't undercooked. You said that anything touched by the Star has to be destroyed.

*Dont you? He betrayed you, in case youve forgotten.*

Dallion shook his head and kept on eating. He was going to deal with the Star. From what Harp had told him, Arthurows had suffered considerable wounds during the realm invasion. The vast majority had come from the aetherbird; some the nymph had inflicted, though her focus was mostly to make sure that the healing didn't occur as fast. It was going to be years, if not decades, before the Star could fight as before, although that wouldn't prevent him from causing chaos. The Star-cults were still active, and the wilderness had more than enough chainlings.

*Youre just dragging this out. You know I cant be held forever.*

I can just bury you somewhere, Dallion said. Or give you to the countess. Then you'll be her problem.

*You wont. Youre afraid that shell use it and release me. Its not the first time Ive seen your kind. The empathy trait is a nice touch. Youll still act the same way. Youll keep the gem close at hand until one day youll finally use it. It wont be the first time its happened.*

And what happened to all the ones who released you before? Dallion asked.

The skill gem fell silent.

Half an hour later, Dallion was back on his way towards the edge of the canyon.

It took a total of fifteen days for him to reach the cliff wall that led to the rest of the world. Lacking enough rope to have Ruby tie it to a rock on the top, Dallion was forced to use his athletics and acrobatics skills to scale his way up. To his surprise, it turned out a lot easier than he expected. The body train increases had come in handy. By nightfall the fallen south was behind him. Now, once more, he had a choice to make.

You could always go to the closest temple of the Order, Nil said. Personally, I'd advise against it.

Fearing the competition?

*Dont get me wrong. Going to the Academy with what youve gained is possibly the only worse option. You could go to Nerosal, of course, as was the original plan, but why not consider your options? The thing you have wont only transform Archduke Linatol into your dear friend, but it could also open the doors of the imperial household itself.*

You know how Ill reply.

Just consider it for a second, the echo insisted. If you become part of the imperial household, no one will dare touch you. Sure, you'll be stuck doing stupid



things for stupid people, but at least you'll be allowed to grow. One day, with luck, you might even get to see the emperor himself.

And that will keep the world safe?

*It has a better chance than most of the alternatives. The Star hasn't dared attack the imperial palace directly ever since the days of the first emperor. You'll be far safer there than with the Order. More importantly, you won't have to follow those insane restrictions. You'll be able to achieve your noble status, if you wish.*

You're starting to sound like Aether.

*And I suppose you have everything figured out?*

Not everything, just what to do next.

*I've heard that before. Remember how inexperienced you were upon joining the Icepicker guild? It was painful to look at you at times, and still you were convinced that you could take down March in a duel. Do you think it's different now?*

If it wasn't, you'd still be shouting at me.

*This isn't a joking matter, dear boy. While I agree that keeping the aetherbird from causing the end of another era, your lack of experience might push the province faster into an internal conflict. You understand next to nothing about politics, as you've shown.*

The decision is made, Nil, Dallion said flatly. I know what I need to do. I just need the guts to do it.

Chapter 623: End of the Hunt

Going to the countess, Dallion said as he passed through the outer gate.

A whole garrison of soldiers was stationed there, but no one dared stop him. It was well known that he had been sent on a phoenix hunt, though that wasn't the only reason. Dallion had deliberately filled his words with dread, making sure it affected everyone in the vicinity, and he hadn't stopped people alone. Combining music with herbology and his empathy trait, he had made sure that all plants and items experienced the same.

Yes, sir! The captain at the gate almost saluted as he stood aside, giving the order to open the gate.

Dallion didn't even wait, moving forward, as if the obstacle was made of air. His action forced the soldiers to hurry, using their own awakened powers to open the gate fast enough.

You're acting like a real noble, Nil said as Dallion passed though. In this case, this wasn't a compliment.

Without a word, Dallion continued on towards the city. It was clear what the echo meant, though at present Dallion didn't care. Him being nice wouldn't change a thing not what had happened in the South, not the war, not even the political game Countess Priscord had started by sending him on this hunt to begin with. If anything, the number of mercenaries focusing on him had increased. On his way back, Dallion had come across several, including the familiar gorgon duo. They had kept their distance, but were still there.

According to Nil, the hesitation was due to the skill gems presence. Since Dallion still had the realm of the aetherbird linked to him, that made him appear to have part of the power of a Moon's familiar.

He wasn't able to use it, of course, but no good mercenary was willing to risk a confrontation in such circumstances.

Hundreds of people were working the fields between the two city walls. No doubt, the countess was stocking up food in preparation for her move against the Archduke, while simultaneously engaging in good relations with provincial merchant guilds. This wasn't a battle she could win. Linatol had more food and land than her, but she had to be seen as playing. In the end, appearance mattered for a lot.

Sir! The guards at the inner gate stood to attention. Some of them Dallion knew relatively well. The overseer will wish to

I'm heading to the countess palace directly, Dallion cut the man off.

But the guard attempted to voice his concern, but quickly stopped.

I have something I'm sure she'll want to see.

Understood. The man gave up. Go ahead.

With a nod, Dallion did so. The streets were filled with people, blissfully enjoying their lives as if nothing had changed. From their perspective, the world was the same as it always had been. There was talk of war, but that was something distant that only affected the northern part of the empire. As far as they were concerned, even the rivalry with Archduke Lanitol was practically a game one which the countess would certainly win, of course.

Ignorance is bliss, Dallion sighed.

There was a time when he had been the same sheltered awakened with huge aspirations for whom every day was full of wonder. Back then, the city alone had seen enormous, let alone the world. There were so many local challenges, interesting friendships, and things to learn that he didn't imagine he'd ever get bored. Now his enthusiasm had faded. The world seemed small, and Nerosal like a speck of dust dealing with trivial, insignificant issues.

Hey, Dal! A street seller waved at him. When he was starting out, she was one of those who had agreed to give him fruit for free with the promise he'd pay back later. At present, he could buy her stall till the end of her life. Nice to see you back again. Going to the Timepiece?

No, not yet. Dallion didn't even bother to fake a smile. I need to finish something. I'll be at Hannah's later.

Give her my best! The new girl that she hired has done wonders for the place. You'll barely recognize it.

Sure. Dallion walked on.

The closer he got to the palace, the greater the number of hidden guards became. All of them were wearing disfocus and blocking items, but that didn't keep them from being spotted. There was a distinct possibility that some of them belonged to the mirror pool, but Dallion doubted it. The Pool had been in bad standing ever since the countess moved to Nerosal. At best, that had entered an arrangement with her to keep things down until the matter with the Archduke had been resolved one way or another.

The soldiers guarding the palace had doubled since the last time Dallion had been here. All of them were awakened, naturally, though now they had far more impressive levels. Many of them were above level forty, to the point that Dallion expected to come across nobles as well.

The countess is expecting me, Dallion said in front of the throne room door.

The four guards standing there didnt budge. Each of them was wearing clothes of ruby thread and armor of sky silver. One glance at their weapons told Dallion that they were specially forged just for them. On the market, they would fetch a substantial sum even by hunter standards.

The countess is in her private chamber, one of the guards said. She was the youngest of the group, somewhere in her early thirties. Shes expecting you.

Even now, the countess was making a show of force. No doubt she thought she had the upper hand. Maybe it was true, but if there was something Dallion had learned, it was that she wouldnt risk having a scene in her own palace. If it ever came out that she had entered in a fight against her champion, the perception of her would suffer.

Dallion split into a hundred instances. A third of them remained where he was, while the rest sprinted along the corridors of the palace. Within seconds, he felt the pressure of someone trying to force split him into a specific outcome, but the attempt was clumsy. Could it be that this was a field in which Dallion surpassed the countess? All nobles could combat split, but it wasnt everyones forte.

Splitting again, he rushed up a towers staircase to the room designated as Priscords own. Then, without knocking, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Three people were in the room: the countess, Lady Maridolds granddaughter, and very much to Dallions annoyancethe noble he had clashed with when rescuing Diroh.

A good effort, my dear, the countess said to the girl. No need to feel bad. Dallion has had a lot of experience, after all. If you continue to be diligent, in a few years youll be able to surpass him.

Anger and fear bubbled up within Dallion. Nobles were indeed a terrifying force. The young girl wasnt even technically a full noble, but the training she had received had allowed her to achieve what had taken Dallion years of real time training. It was clear that the countess meant to humiliate him, and had succeeded.

Take her to the library, the countess said. Dallion and I need to have a private conversation.

With a spiteful smirk, the noble escorted the girl out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Stay calm, Nil said. You dont win anything if you start with anger.

For the first time in a long while, Dallion didnt agree.

Ive completed your hunt, he said. In his mind, he saw himself taking out the bundle of aetherbird feathers and throwing them on the floor. Heres your prize. He split into instances and went through his backpack, taking out the value feathers. A dozen phoenix feathers. Its enough to prove that youve succeeded.

The countess kept on looking at him, not saying a word.

There's no way you could have collected that many by accident.

After another few seconds of silence, Countess Priscord, split as well. Her speed of her instances was impressive, but Dallion had no issues following what was going on. This was both a test and provocation.

Taking the offering, the countess then returned to her previous spot, all in the blink of the eye.

Twelve feathers, she said, counting them. Each of the feathers was identical to the rest, making it beyond doubt that they belonged to the aetherbird. Too many for me to have gathered on my own. The countess extended her hand. Instantly, the black form of the overseer emerged in the room, taking hold of the items. Put them with the rest. Theyll make a splendid addition.

The rest? Dallion asked.

I wouldnt have started this without covering all options. In case you died, I was going to use them as proof proving your success. Three feathers would be enough to sow doubt that the Archduke killed you as you were coming to deliver my prize. The feathers, of course, I was to find hidden in your bodya final selfless act.

And if I just failed without dying?

Nothing was said, but everyone knew the answer. It didnt even seem all that surprising.

I expect youd like your reward? The countess looked at Dallion. You came a bit sooner than I expected, but the groundwork is done. In a few days, Ill announce your triumphant return and grant you a noble title. Something small to begin with. Youll get the real deal once you pass the next gate.

Is she lying? Dallion asked.

Its difficult to tell, Nil replied. She doesnt like you, and nobles dont tolerate competition. At the same time, she has larger battles to fight, so I suppose it could go either way.

Thats no longer necessary, countess. Id prefer some spellcraft cubes, instead.

Money? The noble almost laughed. Youd choose that over a noble title?

Theres something I need to do. Spellcraft cubes will serve me better right now.

If thats your choice. She waved a hand. This thing youre planning to do. Will it affect me?

Only in a positive way. I have a few scores to settle outside the Nerosal.

Etiquette demanded that a hunter not refuse the reward of a patron. His action could be viewed as an outright challenge to the countess authority. Dallion had seen nobles be banished for less. Being the ticket to her success gave him some leverage. Even if the countess wanted to publicly crush him, shed have to wait. By then things were either going to be resolved in his favor, or it wasnt going to matter.

Im just a hunter, Dallion stressed. The arena of nobility isnt for me.

Is it, now? Your grandfather would disagree. In fact, he rose quite high. Some would say that he was a step away from Archduke status.

Do any of them remember him at all, countess? Even among nobles?

No, not most of them. A dry smile formed on the woman's face. I see you've learned a thing or two from his mistakes. Of course, if you pass the next gate, we'll have this conversation again. The only difference would be that it might not be in this palace, and I might be less favorably inclined.

I don't have a choice. It's a risk I'll have to take.

Judging by her lack of expression, now it was the countess who had difficulty determining Dallion's motives. To complicate things even more, at present he had absolutely no intention of becoming a noble, let alone in name only.

Give him his reward, Countess Priscord said, in clear disgust. If money's all he wants, that's what he'll get. In cubes, she remarked. Anything else?

No guards watching me, Dallion said. They aren't any good.

Aren't they? I'll have to make a note of that. As for the rest, I'll think about it.

#### Chapter 624: Old Deals and New

An echo message, Dallion said to the messenger service. To Linatol.

This was pretty much the first time he had used the courier for this service. Physical letters were a lot more appreciated, but they lacked the one thing that echo messages provided: speed. The simplicity of it all was astounding. The courier service had members in all cities, each with echoes of everyone else. Sending messages was a simple matter of one echo conveying the contents to the person that had to make the final delivery. At worst, the target of the message would get it the following day. Since it wasn't even noon, chances were that Dallion's message would arrive in a couple of hours.

You sure? The woman looked at Dallion in surprise. You usually go for letters.

This time it's different.

Right. Being the Hero of Nerosal must keep you busy. The woman smiled and put on her ring. We've got three people free in Linatol right now. Where's the message for?

Hunter's den. It was surprisingly painful saying the words, mostly because Dallion knew what would follow. For Euryale.

Ah, it's right. She moved there. The messenger attempted to engage in small talk. Not an easy task, considering the number of messages that went through her on a daily basis. What's the message?

I'll be going after him. Dallion's throat felt dry. I'm sorry.

A bit cryptic, but sure. The request has been accepted. It'll be delivered in less than an hour. That will be one gold and five silver.

The price was a reminder of why so few could afford the service. It wasn't just about the network, but also about the guarantees. Everyone in the courier service had made a Moon vow to keep anything said and heard secret. If the rumors were to be believed, all couriers had limiting echoes in their own realms, ensuring that they would forget everything work-related in a matter of days or less. There was no way to confirm it, but Dallion had become cynical enough to believe it true.

I also want to send a message to the Cathedral of the Order, Dallion added. To Cleric.

Which cleric? the woman asked.

His name is Cleric. Hes the bishops assistant.

Oh, when you said cleric, I thought she chuckled. Whats the message?

Wheres the Star?

The womans expression froze. Fear emanated through her, ringing so loud that Dallion could feel nothing else.

A-are you sure? the woman asked.

Its a request from the Order, Dallion lied. Send the message.

Request accepted. Itll be delivered immediately. That would be two gold coins.

Dallion gave her four gold coins. Compared to the amount hed just received from the countess, this was insignificant. Without a word of thanks, he left the courier office, making his way to the arena. There was one last thing he had to take care of before returning to Hannahs inn.

Do I need to tell you its a bad idea? Nil asked. Of all the times youve had dealings with that man, only one was in your favor.

*This one will.*

*Even if he agrees, hell ask more than you have. He always does.*

There was some truth to that, but this time Dallion had more than enough means to get what he wanted. And even if hed end up owing another favor, hed gladly do so. After everything that had happened, there was no way hed leave the Star unscathed. One way or another, there was going to be a resolution to all this, this time forever.

Being able to cast spells will help a great deal, Aether whispered from the skill gem. Hes still recovering from the damage Ive caused. Free me and you can have the same power.

Dallion ignored both.

A bubble of space slowly formed around him as he made his way through the city. People and animals tended to move away for no apparent reason. It wasnt conscious. A few even greeted him in passing, though even they werent able to fight the feeling of dread emanating from him. The emotion wasnt Dallions own. Taking Aethers advice, he was continuing to combine his music skill with his empathy trait, causing item guardians not only to feel it, but resonate in turn, spreading it further. It was done quite subtly. There wasnt even a need for Dallion to whistle. Instead, all he did was gently tap his harpsisword as he walked.

Good morning, a fury greeted Dallion the moment he entered the side entrance of the arena. How can I

Wheres the general? Dallion interrupted.

Hes occupied right now. If youd like

Splitting into instances, Dallion rushed past the fury. Her skills were good, but even so she was only able to stop a dozen of his instances. The remaining eighty ran along the corridor, slashing air currents as they did, until reaching the door to the generals chamber. Splitting once more, Dallion entered.

The room had been remodeled yet again. Glass chambers covered three of the walls, full of cloud creatures. Sizes ranged from the size of a coin to that of a full-grown human. In all cases, though, the creatures were made of thunderclouds.

Dal. The general leaned back in his large seat of solid sapphire. Wonderful to see you. I had heard that you'd returned. Given my last conversation with the countess, I didn't expect to see you anytime soon. Could it be that the hunt is over?

I want to buy something, Dallion said. The two fury bodyguards standing next to the general moved closer to the desk. I can take both of them, Dallion said, brimming with confidence. If you want.

That's not necessary. The general gave them a sign to step back. I just redecorated the place. Cost me quite a lot, in fact.

So, we have a deal?

Let me explain how this works. You still owe me. Just because the countess has temporarily delayed things doesn't mean you're off the hook.

Dallion tossed a small leather pouch on the desk. The general looked at it for a few seconds, then slowly reached out for it as if it was made of dirt. The moment he unstrung it, a vibrant purple glow shined through.

A phoenix feather. The general took it out. Dallion could feel a momentary surge of interest, although it was a lot less than he had hoped for. Judging by your behavior, there must be more than one.

There's just one.

Pity.

Are you saying it's not enough?

That all depends on what you want to buy with it. Feathers can't be sold by anyone. Then again, you know perfectly well that I wouldn't want to. Of course, it's just a feather. The general put it back down on the desk. It can't compare to the cloud heart you brought me. See my new collection? All of them were born out of your heart.

Any other time, Dallion would have felt revulsion at the suggestion. Now he found himself too numb to react.

I want the artifact you gave me in Linatol. He pressed on.

That thing? Surprise streamed from the general, even if his expression didn't budge. What happened to the last one?

I fought the Star. Now I want to finish the job.

The general's immediate reaction was to laugh. Seeing that Dallion didn't budge, the laughter soon stopped.

You're serious, aren't you?

Help me, like last time. Everyone wins if the Star is gone, including you.

What's good for trade is good for the trader, the general mused. Assuming I can find what you're looking for, what about my interests? There've been people planning to destroy the Star for centuries. Millennia, if the writings are confirmed. One of the Order's main goals is to destroy him, and yet the Star is still here.

Find me another artifact and I'll get it done.

So confident of you. But what happens if you fail? You still owe me. How will I collect if you're not here?

That's what the feathers for. Dallion tossed another pouch. This one was three times larger, made of fine velvet. There are enough spellcraft cubes for you to be happy. They aren't unique, but you can use them to get someone to find you something unique. As you said a while back, I'm not the only one who's indebted to you.

Indeed, you're not. The general's gaze shifted from Dallion to his desk. Between the two pouches, there was enough to buy a middle-sized town. It's a very generous offer. However, your request is a bit—he made a circle in the air with his left index finger. I don't like throwing away useful things for no purpose. You're good, but you're not at the level to fight the Star. You have to be a Moon to be.

If I didn't think I'd win, I wouldn't be here. Dallion was starting to lose patience. Are you interested, or should I take this to the Mirror Pool?

Touche. The general clapped. True, I'm not the only one who could find it difficult to obtain items. If you trusted the Pool, you'd be with them now. I appreciate the effort, though.

It's you or them. What will it be?

You're being a bit too aggressive, Nil warned. You're tempting him to refuse out of spite.

You make a compelling argument, Dal. Also, I see you've gained a few levels since Linatol. I still don't think you stand a chance, but it'll be amusing to see you try.

The velvet pouch and the phoenix feather disappeared from the desk, each finding themselves in the hands of the fury bodyguards. The air currents they used were a lot more aggressive, serving as a warning.

I'll need a few days, but I believe the item can be found. It's needless to say how rare it is.

Dallion strongly suspected that the general already had one or more of it in his personal collection. There was a time when he swore that the item was unique in the world, as he had done when describing many other things. And yet, each time, he'd manage to miraculously find a new copy whenever the price was right.



You know where to find me. Dallion turned around. As he made a step towards the door, an air current wrapped itself around his left arm. The action wasn't aggressive, but rather an indication that the general had something to say.

I'm getting tired of this. Dallion burst into instances, turning around with half. As he suspected, no attack followed.

Just a piece of advice on the house, the general said while looking at the cloud creatures on the far side of the room. Two of them were engaging in a fight, casting lightning at one another. It always helps to be equipped, but it's not the better equipped or the strongest that wins a battle. If the Order is to be believed, the Star has been tricking people to fight on his behalf since time began. If you really stand a chance, as you believe, he'll be sure to throw everything at you. I trust you haven't told too many people about your current plans?

Dallion didn't answer.

I don't need to tell you the tangled game you've joined. Given that you've been paid, the countess must be pleased with the results, or their lack of. That means she'll pull her protection from you. It might happen right now, but it could be at first light tomorrow. Keep that in mind.

I know, Dallion hissed.

Well, in that case, don't let me stop you.

Dallion took a step towards the door.

On, and just one more.

Once again, Dallion paused, looking at the general over his shoulder.

The phoenix. Did you really catch it? There was a shiver of genuine emotion in his voice.

Possibly even he was fascinated by the prospect. It was understandable. Catching a creature that was supposed to be uncatchable always was a good icebreaker. It also gave Dallion the satisfaction of turning around and leaving without giving an answer.

Chapter 625: Forced Return

## **COIN GUARDIAN**

**Species: SHIELD TURTLE**

**Class: GOLD**

**Health: 40%**

**Traits:**

**- BODY 50**

**- MIND 20**

**- PERCEPTION 20**

**- REACTION 30**

**Skills:**

- GUARD
- ATTACK
- SPIN (Species Unique)
- COCOON (Species Unique)
- REFLECT (Species Unique)

### **Weakness: SHELL JOINTS**

Improving a coin brought back memories. It had been one of the first requests Dallion had received back in his village. Back then, the coin wasn't gold. Dallion hadn't even seen a gold coin. How grandfather had warned him not to attempt to improve that was copper, let alone silver.

At present, gold was a bit beneath Dallion's level, which made it perfect for calmly removing some rust.

Multi-colored markers were everywhere, presenting Dallion with options. After his growth as a hunter, the possibilities of combining skills had grown astronomically to the point that there were no single, or even two-color markers present.

Music, art, attack. Dallion weaved the harp's word through the air, sewing threads of sound around the guardian.

The turtle's shell severely chipped by Dallion's attack. It spun in place in a desperate attempt to break free. Some of the music strands snapped, but still managed to chip into the armor, weakening it further.

Splitting into two instances, Dallion focused on the weak spot markers that now covered the guardian, doing a multi-attack. However, he didn't attack immediately, making full use of his enemy's attack, he completed several guard sequences. At each success, time slowed down to a crawl until stopping completely.

Maintaining his momentum, Dallion finished it all with a point attack, piercing through the turtle's shell as if it were made of foil.

### **TERMINAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 1000%**

Gold sparks faded away as the guardian momentarily disappeared, only to emerge again, gaining a slightly silvery tint.

**COIN level increased**

**The COIN has been improved to PALDIM**

**Your ART skills have increased to 27**

A green rectangle emerged.

Quite the improvement, dear boy, Nil said. Almost flawless, I'd say.

Against a common item guardian, Dallion replied.

Moments later, he was back in the real world, stepping out of the arena. In terms of real time, mere moments had passed since he'd left the general. As far as true time was concerned, it was significantly longer.

Dallion opened his hand. A dozen paldim coins glittered within. The material was undoubtedly valuable, although as it stood, the coins had no purchasing power. Dallion would have to improve them to full platinum to be able to use them. That wasn't going to be a problem, though before proceeding Dallion wanted to have a lot of food and a bit of rest.

It's helping you improve, the old echo countered. That's the main point. And please stop using your music to spread dread. It's unbecoming.

Sorry, I no longer meet your high standards. Is March back in the guild?

*Ah. Things are a bit complicated on that front. Unofficially, the guild has been disbanded.*

It was difficult to say which was worse: the news itself or the casual way in which Nil announced it.

Why are you telling me just now?

*I didn't want to burden you. You haven't been in the best mental state lately. You must have suspected it might happen. With the guild master's connection to the Linatol family, it was normal for the Icepickers to outstay their welcome. If it wasn't for our involvement in the saving of Nerosal, everyone would have been banished or imprisoned. As things stand now, the guildhall is still there, just empty. The people relocated to Linatol, where they have been put in charge of a new guild.*

What about Adzorg?

*Missing by all accounts. Even I don't know where exactly. One thing I do know is that he won't set foot in Linatol unless he's forced to.*

The countess had planned everything well in advance and had acted without mercy. Looking at things objectively, Dallion wouldn't be surprised if she had made a deal with the Star to obtain the position of Archduke. She was supposed to know better, but power was addictive. The only thing more significant for nobles than obtaining power was the fear of losing it. When it came to that, fairness and civility flew out of the window, hidden beneath a fake facade of etiquette.

In more and more aspects, Countess Priscord was showing herself to be worse than the general. For one thing, she continued to completely ignore her promise, sending even more soldiers to spy on Dallion. They were clearly putting in the effort wearing gear and even clothes without guardians. Their concealment attempts were no match for Dallion's improved perception, though. On one occasion, he even went so far as to order a building guardian to have a few roof pee; off the roof, causing someone to lose his balance. The guard was skilled enough not to get hurt, but he clearly brought too much attention to himself.

You're pushing it again, dear boy Nil said in his disapproving tone.

Just making a point.

*People have died for less.*

Im not worth the bother. The countess knows Ill be gone in a few days. Shell let me be until then.

Finally, the familiar building of the Gremlins Timepiece was in front. It appeared to be doing well. The number of customers had increased to the point they had been when Veil and Gloria had been there. Additional tables had been put outside, allowing customers to enjoy their meal on the street.

Keep your guard up, Ruby, Dallion whispered. But dont act until I say so. He hadnt departed under the best of circumstances. For all he knew, it could have been days before Hannah or anyone found that he had dashed out of the window.

Dallion remained perfectly calm upon entering the inn. Hannah, on the other hand, was not nearly as reserved. Upon seeing him, she instantly slammed the mug she was cleaning onto the counter, causing everyone to stop what they were doing and stare in her direction.

If it isnt the hero of Nerosal gracing us with his presence, she said, her tone dredged with disapproval. To what do I owe this honor?

Giving me the Eury treatment already? Dallion asked. He took a while to look at the people in the room. The moment his glance met someone elses, the other person looked away. I thought itd be after I had a bite, at least.

The innkeeper crossed her arms with a frown.

Di, tell Aspan to get something done.

Hell be paying, right? the fury asked, her tone not much friendlier. Everyone knew it wasnt about the money, but rather about making a point.

Now wishing to enter an argument on that topic, Dallion tossed a small pouch of couns at the counter. Before the pouch could make contact with the wooden surface, it was snatched by an air current and pulled towards Diroh.

Theres some gold in there, Dallion said as he sat at the counter.

No, not here, Hannah said. In the kitchen.

Dallion didnt argue. He was about to go there to have a proper talk with the copyette, anyway. No doubt Hannah had indicated that she would be joining in.

Hold up the fort for a while, Di, the innkeeper said. Ill take over after lunch.

Of course.

The kitchen was flawlessly organized. Dis cloud fox had curled up on the ceiling and seemed to be comfortably asleep. It had taken to the change of surroundings quite well.

Dal, Aspan nodded at him, while frying a large wok of vegetables, while four large stakes were cooking on a layer of fire. What he hadnt noticed before was that the layer of fire was by no means connected to the stove beneath it.

Didnt think Id find him here, Aether said in Dallions awakened realm. Twice he tried to conquer the world and now hes cooking in some backwater place, as if nothing had happened.

I hear you found the phoenix, the copyette said as a second copy of the cook rose up from the floor. Any truth to that?

I found enough to end the hunt, Dallion said without giving details.

Good for you. The innkeepers tone continued to be as harsh as before. That excuses you running off without warning? And you couldnt leave a nope, but you had your familiar cast an illusion to pretend youre still here.

On Dallions shoulder, Ruby trembled. It was too soon since Gleam was gone.

Someone tried to poison me. Dallion took a seat at the kitchen table. Put a tray of food in front of the door. I thought you knew.

The silence suggested that they did, or at the very least, suspected.

Does Jiroh know about you? Dallion turned to the cook.

More or less. She knows somethings going on. Skye knows everything. Shes one of us, as well.

Yet one more otherworlder. That explained in part why the cloud creature had taken such a liking to Aspan and vice versa. The rule of the world still held true: otherworlders tended to attract each other no matter what.

That makes things easier. Ill need to have a chat with her and would appreciate you being around.

Something to do with magic? One of the Aspans began putting some food on a plate, while the other continued with the cooking.

Not only. There was a brief moment of hesitation. I might as well tell you. Im going after the Star.

The words managed to make all parts of the copyette to freeze. Hannahs expression turned sour.

We already fought once in the south. It ended in a stalemate.

And now you think you can finish the job? The innkeeper glared at him, as if he were a teenager, claiming he could take the weight of the world on his shoulders.

I do, Dallion replied laconically. Ill be leaving in a few days. If all goes well, I should be back in a few weeks. If not, it wont matter.

And youre fine subjecting Eury to that?

Yes, Dallion lied. If he had one regret, it was that he might lose Eury; or rather, the gorgon might lose him. Blocking a large part of his emotions hadnt made Dallion stupid. He knew there was a high chance of ending up dead. At the same time, there was an even higher chance of that if he left the opportunity to slip by. You dont have to help me. I hope you would, though, considering what weve been through.

Blackmail doesnt suit you. There was a note of regret in Hannahs voice.

Ive been hearing that a lot lately. Between the upcoming civil war in the province and the Stars desire to escape the limitations placed on him by the Moons, Ive gone beyond caring. Winning is important now. Winning and surviving.

Sometimes chasing those things is the fastest way to lose them. So what do you need from us? Hannah asked.

Everything you can share about the Star.

Thats it? Thats more Aspans field.

Also, everything you can tell me about Eurys mentor.

There was potentially a lot more he could demand. For one thing, Dallion knew that Hannah kept some extremely well crafted and lethal weapons at the inn. She had loaned one to Veil when he had been in Nerosal. Possibly in a few days, he might do just that.

And protection while Im here, Dallion added. Whoever tried to knock me out last time will try again.

If youre hoping that, Ill come with you this time, dont. Aspan put the plant in front of Dallion. Doing it here was risky enough. Going out of Nerosal the Moons might have something to say about it.

Im not. Dallion was still going to ask the Moons about it, regardless.

Without me you have as much chance of hurting the Star as

Its useless, Hannah interrupted. Cant you see hes already thrown his life away? All thats left is going through the motions leaving everyone else to pick up the pieces once he falls.

#### Chapter 626: Low on Time

Time was never enough, even with eternity at ones disposal. The joke that Dallion was starting to fully appreciate was that there were three things an awakened could never have enough of: food, time, and levels. Half into his lunch, he had jumped back into the awakening realm of his form and went through a series of improvements, improving it to full platinum. The immediate goal was to reach the level cap of his art skills, which he had been outright neglecting as a hunter. Normally, they werent something that could be useful outside a tailor shop, but when combining them with full combat skills changed things quite a bit. At present, he had upped them to thirty-six, which gave him a real chance of hitting the eighty level cap in another day or two.

Nil had gone back to complaining, pointing out that the sudden boost wasnt as beneficial as one might think, but was ignored. The reason Dallion wanted to up the level was because it would provide him more options, and when facing an opponent such as Arthurows options were key as long as the general came through. As sad as it was to put the fate of the world in the hands of a spoiled, snobbish black marketer, it wouldnt be the first time. The general was driven by extreme self-interest. Thats why he had helped Dallion save Nerosal from Star and also why he was going to help out now.

After rendering the fork platinum, Dallion had quickly wolfed down the rest of the food in front of him and then gone back to the realms where he had taken on an awakening trial. The combat had been brief but impactful, forcing him to use every trick he knew and discover a few new ones in order to claw his way to victory. The challenge was a simple test of combat skill, in which Dallion had to face an echo of Aspan.

Going all out against a copyette was precisely the thing that Dallion needed to sharpen his skills. Even so, in the back of his mind, there remained a fear that it could well end up being too late. The worst part was that there was nothing that Dallion could have done. While it was easy claiming that

he should have leveled up more, it wasn't like he hadn't done so out of laziness. Real world combat was important too, and had served him when facing low level nobles.

One more, Dallion said, pushing the empty plate towards the Aspan that was sitting at the table. Does the fork cover it?

Now I'll need to buy a new fork, Hannah huffed. I should slap you at the back of your head. You think were your servants?

Dallion was tempted to say not yet but he held his tongue.

And you pick the worst time to come for food. Lunch draws in the crowds, and not thanks to you! Di has been working her ass off, keeping the inn clean, and doing your job as well. The girls barely a double digit and look what she's achieved.

I've achieved a few things as well. Dallion closed his eyes for a moment. After leveling up to seventy-one, he had increased his body trait to forty-two. He'd also managed to gain an achievement, but that had just boosted his mind by two. Frankly, he would have very much preferred to get his body into the fifties.

Ha! All you've achieved is to reopen your wound. Hannah noted. Probably you'll order that I patch you up as well?

It's a permanent effect. I'm used to it.

To Dallion's surprise, that didn't earn him the response he expected. The woman didn't shout, nor did she criticize him, as she usually did when upset. Instead, she went next to him and grabbed hold of his right shoulder. Pain shot through Dallion's entire body, making him flinch. Seeing that, Hannah let go.

What's the effect?

It took Dallion a few moments to fight through the pain and restore his breathing to normal.

There are two, he said. Pain and bleeding.

How long will they last?

Don't know. Lux keeps things in check.

That's just patching up. Once you get a rest, visit a shrine to find out. The Orders good at that.

Can't you fix it? Dallion turned to Aspan.

The copyette shook his head.

I'll deal with it then. Or not.

The bleeding wasn't too much of an issue, but the pain was getting more and more distracting. Adrenalin numbed it enough to take off the edge, sadly never completely.

Another pile of food was put in front of Dallion.

Eat up, the copyette said. And level up more today. He placed a new fork on the table. And don't ruin any more forks.

The rest of lunch passed in relative quiet. Hannah left the kitchen, getting back to her usual duties. Aspan merged back into one, then shouted for Diroh to serve the orders. Back when Jiroh was here, the fury would go in the kitchen in person to take the dishes. Her sister seemed to value efficiency, using air currents to do the same without even setting foot there. It was also possible that she was doing that on purpose so as to show Dallion how much she didn't want to see him.

You didn't get hit once during your improvement fights. Funnily enough, it was Nil who broke the silence. That's a massive improvement in how you used to fight before.

Dallion nodded as he ate. Initially, he had hoped to manage to pass a trial without having to rely on Lux for healing or flying. Reality quickly showed him that it was too early for such aspirations. Maybe in time he'd be able to achieve such a feat.

Two more servings vanished before Dallion's cravings were gone. Carefully, he rolled up his right sleeve and unrolled the bandages. Scar was still there, going all the way to his elbow. It seemed quite fresh and shallow. As a permanent effect, it was going to remain in its current condition for quite a while. There was no universal standard for how long the effect would last. Supposedly, clerics and mages were able to tell, as were some magic beings. The aetherbird would only be too happy to tell Dallion, as long as he set it loose.

Tell Di to see me later. Dallion stood up. I'll go rest a bit.

Bleeding like that?

I have bandages in my room. If it's still my room.

Don't give her more grief. She was mad at you that you left like that, but that's it.

Someone put the tray there. The building guardian couldn't tell me who. Dallion pulled down his sleeve. Nothing happens here without both of you knowing.

This is an awakened in. Certain vows have been made to ensure that

That might have worked on me a few years ago. You either know something or you suspect. Which is it?

A flash of light went through the kitchen, blinding Dallion for a fraction of a second. His initial reaction was to reach for the nearest weapon. Thankfully, he managed to suppress it.

You're barking up the wrong tree. Yes, I know most things that happen here. Hannah probably knows more. However, we're not the only people who can come and go unseen in a building.

The Mirror Pool won't dare.

Who's talking about them? Aspan tossed a rather large orange fruit in the air, then shifted his hand into a knife and sliced it into pieces. The display seemed entirely for Dallion's benefit, telling what the copyette couldn't.

Dallion's first thought was mercenaries. They would have the skills and the motivation. That didn't sound right, though. Blocker rings would ensure that none of the guardians could sense someone's



presence, but they wouldn't keep people from noticing. The only way for them to have delivered the food was to appear in front of Dallion's door with the tray and

*You did that, didn't you?*

How much food can you spare? Dallion asked.

Not enough. As Hannah said, you came at a bad time. Aspan finished cutting the fruit and arranged it in a large bowl. There's some money behind the flour. Hannah keeps it for merchant bribes. It should be enough for you to get something. You'll still need to get your effects checked.

Not in Nerosal. Dallion went to the sacks of flour. The pouch was easy to spot. Grabbing it, he checked its contents—three golds and close to a hundred silvers. Hannah must have used it recently, for it wasn't enough for a proper bribe, not in a city anyway. I'll still need the info I asked you.

I don't know about the hunter. As for the Star, he's always been in the neighborhood.

Anything more?

I can only tell you if you already know. Still, think about something. Of all the places in the world, why did he choose to get involved here?

Because Nerosal was built on the ruins of another city?

I'm not talking about this time. I'm talking about all the times.

As riddles went, this one was rather good. Not that it particularly helped with things. In fact, it was almost as cryptic as if it were coming from the Moons. Dallion had been looking forward to a long talk with Hannah and Aspan, not to mention some adequate rest. All those plans had been cut short.

Go.

And Hannah? She wasn't going to be pleased if Dallion disappeared again an hour after reappearing. Knowing her, she probably was aware of that. The sly fox knew a lot more than she let on. Sadly, it was looking less and less likely that Dallion would find out what.

If you come back, she'll get over it.

And if I don't, it won't matter.

Good luck.

The moment Dallion got out of the kitchen, he rushed up the stairs to his room. A few of the local item guardians dared greet him, fearful of his dread aura. The door was open by the time he reached it. The place was speckless: everything was clean; the bed was tidy, and even Dallion's belongings were neatly arranged. Most of them were clothes, ends and odds he'd gathered as a hunter, the stone orchid stone, and some musical instruments. Each object came with its own set of memories, bringing him back to a more optimistic simpler time that was, until he saw the hand-mirror that had once been home to Gleam.

In less than a second, the chill of reality filled Dallion's mind.

Ruby, the window, Dallion said as he put his backpack on the floor. If anyone tries to spy, slice him.

The shardfly flew off his shoulder and fluttered towards the window. Meanwhile, Dallion looked around to find his bandages. Since he'd become a hunter, he'd developed the habit of keeping a few rolls at all times. Most often they were to deal with small scrapes while taking care of animals, so he didn't make a mess before healing himself with Lux's powers.

Usually, there was a bowl of water next to the mirror. The bowl was still there, though it was empty. Nonetheless, Dallion took it and put it on the bed. The bandages ended up being near his clothes.

Dallion took off his shirt and whipped as much blood he could from his arm. A sudden sensation of pain reminded him of the second permanent effect. Gritting his teeth, he finished cleaning his arm, and threw the bloody shirt in the bowl.

Lux. Dallion sat down.

The dartblade floated off the backpack, surrounded by a blue glow, then pressed against Dallion's wound. The scar closed again, forming a thin reddish crust. It was only going to last a few minutes enough for him to bandage it. This wasn't the first time he'd done it, though unlike before, the pain constantly got in the way. The minutes seemed like hours, but finally, he was done.

I need a drink. Dallion collapsed in the bed. His breathing was erratic. His body was struggling against the pain with all this might, regardless that there wasn't a cause.

You need to go to a temple, dear boy, Nil corrected. You could have done that before, wasting hours in the kitchen.

The old echo had no memory of anything that had occurred there; none other than Dallion did. The copyette didn't need more entities aware of his existence. For someone who avoided using magic, he put a lot of effort into erasing memories.

I'll do it in a bit, Dallion whispered. Right now, I just need

The door to his room swung open.

I can't believe you! Diroh stormed in. You could have at least said a few words!

Yes, Dallion thought. I could have.

Ignoring the pain, he split into instances, leaping off the bed. Choosing an instance in which the fury wasn't able to react, he grabbed her by the hand.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Chapter 627: Aetherbird and Fury

Where are we? Diroh rose into the air, startled by the change.

My realm, Dallion simply replied. I thought you were used to reality shifting by now.

Shame appeared throughout the fury's body like small bubbles. Despite her calm exterior, she still had a number of insecurities, especially when it came to things relating to awakening.

I am! Diroh tried to sound harsh. Why did you pull me in here?

So that we can talk. You have questions, I have questions, and I prefer no one listens in.

Is that what life comes down to? Questions?

The question was understandable. Dallion would have preferred to have a casual conversation, he'd have enjoyed mentoring her along the path awakening, maybe even introducing her to a guild so she could develop her skills faster. However, that wasn't in the cards right now. Time was a serious factor. It often was, though now, the Star was the hunted, even if he wouldn't remain so for long.

You've lived with hunters most of your life. Aren't you used to it?

Yeah, but you're not a hunter. The fury floated down. You, Eury, my sister, you're different. You don't belong in this world.

It wasn't much of an insult, though it still made Dallion shake his head. Surprisingly, there weren't any blobs of anger in her, just a touch of sadness.

You act as if it isn't real. You try to achieve everything you can, then when you get bored you just leave.

You got all that by serving hunters?

By listening to them. They discuss otherworlders a lot when you're not there. When they get drunk, they don't even care who's listening.

Yes, they do, Dallion said to himself. The higher the body trait, the more difficult it was to get drunk. Spike of the Icepicker guild had that issue. Even after becoming an elite, he couldn't kick the habit, making spend large amounts of money on drinking... and fighting. The hunters who discussed otherworlders in front of Di had done so deliberately, probably to warn her what she could expect. By the looks of things, they had only partially succeeded.

Eury's mentor, Dallion changed the subject. He found you, right?

Everyone knows that, Diroh replied with a mocking snort.

When?

The smirk vanished off the girl's face.

When did he find you, Di? Dallion repeated.

A while back...

Over five years?

There was no answer.

Closer to ten?

Im not sure. I don't remember much from back then. It could have been ten. Definitely more than two. He rarely came to visit.

Once per year?

Maybe less at first. It was a lot later that he told me about Ji.

That must have been the time when he'd given her the hunters inn. It made sense: keeping her outside of the empire, but close enough to keep an eye on things. That could have been the reason he'd told Jiroh about her at all.

Did he show you this? Dallion summoned the purple skill gem in his hand.

At the sight of it, the fury recoiled. A flash of pain went through her body, like roots of a tree, before it vanished again.

I'm not sure. It looks familiar, but I can't remember him showing it to me.

Finally, Dallion had gotten the confirmation needed to piece together what had happened during the previous hunt. A lot of grand powers had done a lot to bury the whole thing, and none of them had all the elements to begin with.

Dallion was still uncertain whether it was the Academy faction that had initiated the whole thing or the Star. The point was that they had joined efforts to do so, all in the goal of capturing the aetherbird. The mages had provided the means, the Star the location, and a group of highly trained mercenaries had been hired to see it through.

The hunt had succeeded. Jiroh and Eurys' mentor had managed to catch Aether by invading his realm and winning. Given that he was of this world, he must have been exceptionally skilled. Captured, the aetherbird had reverted to a skill gem, probably the state he had been way back when he had been created for the first time. At that point, something in the hunters' motivation had changed. Instead of supplying the skill gem as he was supposed to, the hunter had offered a handful of feathers. This hadn't gone down well with the parties involved. The hunters were banished and subsequently killed off, all with the exception of Havoc. However, by then it was too late. Jiroh's mentor had already found a place to hide the gem: the realm of an unawakened child.

That's why you were gone for a decade, isn't it? Dallion asked.

I told you I can't be locked up forever, the aetherbird replied. Magic always finds a way to escape, given enough time. Do you plan to do the same or keep me in your realm?

As much as Dallion wanted to answer, he found that he was unable to. Eurys' mentor must have gone through the same: was it worth the risk of putting it in the realm of a child in order to save the world? Putting it in an awakened would have little effect, and an adult was more likely to be driven insane.

You changed into an icorn, Dallion said. Why?

*No particular reason. I just didn't want to be obvious. Could have been anything. It only mattered when Diroh awakened.*

No doubt it had. That must have been the period around which sightings of the aetherbird had started to materialize, giving the countess an excuse to set the whole thing in motion. Or maybe she hadn't done so on her own? There were too many coincidences stacking up. A few years back, a mage, the countess, and the Star were all together in the same place. Back then, Dallion believed the Star's goal was to take the city and kill everyone in it. What if he had it all wrong? The loss of Nerosal could have been part of a deal: The Star got the city, the mage faction set the ground for getting the aetherbird, and Countess Priscord had an excuse to achieve her ambitions and the

backing she needed. If that were the case, could it mean that she was working with the Star even now?

Whats it do? Diroh asked, interrupting Dallions train of thought.

Trouble, he replied, unsummoning it away. It causes trouble.

And you think Jirohs mentor gave it to me?

No, Dallion lied. He probably kept it close at all times. I just wanted to know whether youd seen it on him.

You pulled me into your realm to ask me that? Why? Whats going on? And dont give me some lame excuse. Ive had a lot of practice with Ji. Are you planning on leaving this world as well?

It had been a while since Dallion had heard the question asked. Unsurprisingly, the answer was the same.

No, Im trying to save it.

You know, youre full of crap. The fury crossed her arms, floating a few feet away again.

The comment made Dallion smile.

Yeah, I suppose I am. That doesnt make me wrong. While I was gone, did anyone ask you about the hunter?

No. Lots of people asked about Ji. She seems tove been a celebrity here. Lots of guys asked me about my old inn, but they were just trying to ask me out.

Thats good.

Thats the last thing I thought youd say. Are you okay?

Good question, Nil said in a told-you-so tone. Are you?

No matter how one looked at it, the answer was no. The recent loss of Gleam combined with the fear of the Star taking over the world had put Dallion in a dark state. Even beyond that, though, it couldnt be said that he was alright. He considered he was, maybe even pretended, but the closer he got to level eighty, the harder life became. He had left his guild and become a hunter to be free of the complex webs of relations that governed the cities, yet that had only gotten him there faster.

Ill be leaving the city, Dallion said. Hannah will take care of you, same as before. If anyone comes asking for me

Tell them Ive never seen you. The fury looked away.

No. Dont lie. Theyll know if you do.

Youre a bastard! Worse than my sister! At least she didnt give me any expectations! You come to see me after shes gone, you get me when Im in trouble, and after all that, you leave!

Thats what otherlanders do. Dallion forced himself to say. It wasnt pleasant, but any alternatives he could think of would be worse. With luck, shell focus her anger on him and survive all this. His

leaving increased the odds. In a moment, we'll leave our realm. It's important that you continue what you were doing before we entered.

You think someone's spying on us? Here?

Pretend this never happened for the next half hour. Longer if you can. After that, tell everything to Aspan. Not Hannah. He'll know what to do.

Anger flared up for a moment, then quickly subsided as sadness, and determination formed. The fury could see Dallion's reasons even if she didn't like them. She too was in a difficult position, forced to hide her unusual magic ability as well as her cloud pet.

This is it, isn't it? she whispered.

I don't know. Things will be different no matter what happens.

I wish I never met you.

Reality shifted, taking them both back to the real world. Not used to the sudden change, the fury lost balance for a fraction of a second. Dallion tightened his grip until she got used to her surroundings.

Sorry, he said with a fake smile. It's just the trip. I promise to have a chat at dinner.

Liar. There was almost no emotion in the word. Moments later, she was gone, slamming the door behind her.

That went well, Nil said.

Definitely believable, Dallion agreed. More likely than not, it gave him a few hours head start. The bigger question was where to go now. Returning to the general was pointless. Even if he had the artifact, the snob wasn't going to give it out of principle. Walking about the city was risky, except maybe going to an awakening shrine. As much as the Order was annoyed at Dallion, surely they wouldn't allow him to be attacked on their territory. There was only one way to find out.

Dallion reached for his backpack, then suddenly stopped. There was no point in taking it. All he needed was his functional combat gear. The food, the tools, bestiary tome, even the dryad bowl weren't going to be of any use at all. The only thing he'd achieve by bringing them was to put them at risk.

Nothing but distractions, Dallion whispered as he removed the whip blades sheath. It too was unneeded. Ruby, he said. It's time to go.

Obediently, the shardfly fluttered onto his shoulder, where it closed his wings and froze up like a piece of decoration.

Not the window, I hope, dear boy? Nil asked.

Without answering, Dallion left the room. Calmly, he made his way down the stairs. The crowd had all but gone, leaving Di and Hannah some time to prepare for the dinner rush. Dallion barely glanced at either of them as he left.

Theyre still watching, Ruby said.

Where? Dallion had glanced over the area upon leaving the inn, but he hadnt noticed any guards.

*The chimneys across. They arent chimneys.*

Illusions? Thinking back, the rooftops did seem somewhat different from how Dallion remembered them.

How are you able to see through illusions? he asked.

I can only spot them, Ruby replied. Gleam taught me.

*Thats a good start. Well need a lot more to avenge her, though. Always be ready, and never show any mercy.*

Chapter 628: Broken Hideout

Maybe this was a mistake. Dallion leaned against the wall of the small room.

Going to the Order, especially in this city, wasnt his first choice. And yet it was a lot better than most alternatives. The attempt to enter as an ordinary awakened had completely failed. The curates at the entrance had instantly recognized Dallion and ushered him in as his level demanded. He was then taken to the personal quarters of the local cleric, where he was offered refreshments and asked to wait.

So far there didnt seem to be any inherently bad in their attitude. Dallion had even had a few conversations with the local guardiansfrom furniture item guardians, to those of quills and pieces of parchment. None of them had anything alarming to say in his regard. An old inkwell had even reckoned that hed be treated with the utmost respect, being a Moons chosen and all. Unfortunately, Dallion found that difficult to believe.

The cleric is approaching, the door guardian said. Almost at the same time, Dallion heard the faint sound of steps outside. Moments later, the door opened and a tall, stoic-looking woman in red cleric garbs entered.

It was the first time Dallion had seen her. If he had to guess, she was new to Nerosal, probably new to the province. For one thing, although her attire shared a design with that of the provincial clerics, its colors were undoubtedly unique.

Moons be with you, Initiate, the woman said with a low bow. Her long brown hair fell all over her face as she did so.

Moons be with you. Dallion moved away from the wall.

Apologies for the delay. I was engaged in an Order matter and couldnt come immediately.

Understandable. Dallion nodded. I just came to check the status of my permanent effects. And to have a talk with my Moon.

It would be my honor to assist you. She raised her head, then took a few steps towards him. Her actions were sharp and precise, a lot different from the common temple clerics.

Battle cleric? Dallion asked. There was no reason for battle clerics to be sent to the city. Then again, given the uncertainty that was expected, maybe the Order wanted to cover their bases.

Good eyes, initiate. She extended her hand, palm pointing upwards. May I enter your realm?

Be ready, Dallion said to the echoes and guardians in his domain, then took hold of her hand.

No red invasion rectangles appeared in front of him. In fact, there were no rectangles at all. Dallion remained standing, very much in the real world. A second later, the cleric relaxed her hand, indicating for him to let go.

Quite lucky, considering your way of life, the cleric said. Unfortunately, I wont be able to do anything for you.

Did she enter my realm? Dallion asked.

Briefly, Genone of his echoesreplied. She just stayed in the awakening area for a few minutes, then left.

*Nil, anything I should be worried about?*

It was drilled into the head of any awakened that allowing anyone in ones awakening realm posed a huge risk. After becoming an initiate, Dallion had found out that there was an exception to the rule. The Order of the Seven Moons had people dedicated to guiding and helping awakened. Some of them could do so by entering the domain of the person and removing the flaws. Each of them had taken a Moon Vow not to harm anyone while in their realm. Even thinking about it would be met with instant punishment from the Moons themselves.

Why not?

The effects are strong, just not harmful. I dont have the level to remove them. Youll need a bishop to do that, and at present, all bishops in the province are in the capital.

In a subtle way, she had shown to be aware of the ongoing conflict between the countess and the archduke, as well as Dallions relation to the whole mess.

I guess theres nothing that can be done. Dallion did his best to appear calm. Where can I rest?

You wish to talk to your Moon, initiate?

Yes.

I would suggest using this room. Ill make sure you arent disturbed.

Not the best welcome, but beggars werent choosers. After a nod from Dallion, the cleric left the room, leaving him alone. Dallion then found a relatively comfortable spot on the floor and lay down.

Sleep came fast, if not particularly easily. Dallion was helping to see the Green Moon in his dream, or Jiroh at the very least. No such thing happened. Dallion was forced to go through a series of



disconnected nightmare scenes, all having to do with the Star. In some he fought, in others he was chased, in third ones still, Dallion was a helpless observer in the crowd watching a horror unfolding. In each case, however, the end result was the same: the Star, or some minion, would kill him, bringing an end to one scene and the start of the next.

Several times Dallion watched his home village destroyed. His mother was also there one of the people trying to protect him, only to get killed along with everyone else. Once the battle was back on Earth. Both Dallion and the Star were equipped with magic and heavy automatic weapons. The encounter lasted for hours, buildings crumbling around them, but even there he ended up swallowed by the stream of darkness that poured down from the sky that seemed to cover the entire world.

When Dallion woke up, the Room was as empty as before. Both Ruby and Lux assured him that no one had entered the room. Unfortunately, they also said that he'd been asleep for merely three hours. Given the number of nightmares he'd managed to experience, Dallion had hoped it would be at least twice as much.

What now? Dallion asked himself.

He could stay here until evening, then pass by the general. That option didn't feel particularly appealing.

You can always have the general send you the item, Nil suggested. He's scum, but he has his ways. All you need to do is leave him an echo item.

Okay. There was nothing for him to do in the city, anyway.

*There is one more place I think you should visit, though...*

The place turned out to be the last that Dallion expected the Icepickers guild hall.

Stepping into the building was strange on several levels. Centuries in true time had passed since the last time Dallion had visited it. In the past, there had always been people there, even at the times of the festival. A sense of nostalgia came over Dallion as he remembered back to the time he'd train with Vend, or sneak into the sword room in his attempts to reach the end of the world item. For a time, this was the place he had called home, a place filled with quirky characters, oddballs, and as it had turned out fallen nobility. If Dallion hadn't left, there was every chance he'd still be with them now. Even after the artifact craze had come to its end, there was still the odd item that the guild was given to clear. Also, there were the sanitation missions and house repair missions. Though simple, such work could have been fun. Also, it would have kept him from getting entangled in the complicated game of politics and power. It would be a calm, simple life, each day being pretty much like the last... then again, Dallion would never have seen the world or learned the things he had. More than likely, he wouldn't have acquired half the skills he currently owned.

Hello, Dallion, the guardian of the building greeted him. It's been a while since I've seen you. How have you been?

Dallion almost felt sad. He knew that the guardian could feel the negative emotions spreading from him like a cloud, and yet it was still making an effort. As the saying went, area guardians tended to mimic the nature of their occupants, both the good and the bad.

Where is everyone? Dallion asked as he walked through the hall, fingers sliding along the wooden paneling of the wall.

*The guild master closed me up. Most of them left along with him for Linatol. Theyve probably gone to another guardian. I can only wait and hope for them to return one day.*

That was highly unlikely to happen. Dallion had seen how merciless nobles were towards people and guardians alike. It would be typical for the countess to tear the building down and have a new one built in its place. She had already done the same to the palace, ensuring that not even a brick remained loyal to the previous lord mayor.

Why did you want me to come here, Nil? Dallion asked.

*Id have hoped that after all your training and experience, youd have become a bit more attentive. The guild hall told you that most of the people left for Linatol. He didnt say all.*

Barely had the old echo said that, when Dallion heard the faintest of creaks from the floor above.

Instincts took over, making him burst into fifty instances, spreading through halls and stairways. The effort didnt last long. Standing on the second flight of stairs were two people, both of which Dallion knew well.

Nice to see youre still practicing your splitting, Vend said. He appeared a lot more tired than before, the dark rings under his eyes indicating that he hadnt slept for a long time. Passed the two hundred mark?

All of Dallions instances faded away, leaving only one to remain in reality.

No, not yet.

Managed to keep them up for over five seconds?

It was typical for Vend to ask about such things, even after all this time. He was never one for small talk and had to be forced to take on apprentices. As far as Dallion knew, the guild elite had quite the practice after becoming a lieutenant.

While seeing Vend was surprising, it was the person next to him that Dallion didnt expect in the least.

March, he thought. There had been many rumors regarding her after the Linatol mission. It was said that she had been kicked out of the guild, banished, or kept for a millennium within a prison item. All of this speculation sounded plausible.

Why are you here? Dallion asked.

Vend chuckled at the question, looking away.

Looking a gift horse in the mouth, March stated calmly. You really have changed. Hannah asked us to help you. Considering what youve gotten yourself messed up with, its the least we can do.

Hannah? No doubt Captain Adzorg was also involved. Thats why Nil had been so insistent that Dallion pass through the guild hall.

For old times sake? Dallion asked. You wont be able to help me this time.

Youve really grown too big for your britches, Vend scoffed.

None of you can take on the countess. If you join me, thats what youll be doing.

Thats for us to worry about. March frowned. I promised that well help and

A loud crack echoed throughout the building. Black tears appeared along the walls and floor, spreading as if the structure were made of paper.

All three awakened split, instances scattering in all directions. Screams filled the air the last cry of a dying guardian. Anger filled Dallion. It was one thing for a guardian to be killed through the destruction of its item. This wasnt the case the guardian was being killed from the inside out, destroyed by Star-spawn.

To the fourth floor! March shouted just as the floor collapsed, hollowing out of the building.

Faster than the eye could follow, the captain drew her sword, deflecting any falling debris before he could hit her. Vend, on his part, went through a chain of combat splitting, avoiding them. In contrast, Dallion did nothing. Remaining perfectly still, he watched everything around him crumble, leaving only the outer walls. Only when the dust started to settle did he draw his harpsisword, tapping it on the side of his leg.

Im sorry, Dal. A black figure surrounded by void matter emerged in the middle of the formed rubble. Im so, so sorry.

Im sorry as well, he raised his weapon, Overseer.

## Chapter 629: Parting Ways

Even since the countess had set him on the hunt, Dallion had been fearing this moment. To some degree, he knew it was inevitable. Despite her personal feelings, the Overseer was the citys guardian, and the city belonged to Countess Priscord.

Black tendrils shot from the figure. A few of them flew in Marchs direction, though most were aimed at Dallion. The countess orders apparently had been very specific. Dallion deliberately let several of his instances to be pierced by the attack, despite the pain, to see how serious the fight was. Without exception, all the instances received critical or terminal wounds. One was even killed outright by an instant decapitation.

It was safe to assume that the countess wasnt sending a warning.

I thought shed give me a day, Dallion said, infusing spark with his music skills. With luck, this was going to pass through the Overseers defenses and infuse her with reluctance and hesitation. What changed?

The overseer attacked, yet again, though this time a point attack from March shredded the tendrils coming from her before they could reach half the distance to Dallion. A second point attack followed, though was blocked by part of the wall collapsing in the attacks path.

Being a city guardian had its advantages every subsequent area guardian had no choice but to obey what was asked and when there was no guardian, the overseer could take over, just like she had now.

Pain! Dallion shouted, adding as much of the sensation as he could in his voice.

All of Vends instances suddenly vanished, leaving him grabbing his chest. The pain wasn't physical, but it was extremely difficult to bear. Also, it affected everyone in the area, people and guardians included.

Faster than the eye could see, March dashed from her position to her lieutenant, grabbing him and tossing him over the wall of the building remains. The landing wasn't going to be pleasant, but less painful than if he'd continue to take part in the fight.

You didn't use that before, the Overseer said.

You know who to thank for that. Each word was infused with spark and weight, building up on the overseer. Establishing a link to the void was impossible, so Dallion changed tactics targeting the human element of the overseer—the woman who at one point had almost been like family, the one who forty years ago had been in love with his grandfather.

Kraisten said that once, thought not to me. Seems that the cities changed both of you in the end.

At first, Dallion thought that she was trying to use skills on him. Staying on guard, for several seconds he focused, searching for traces of emotion in the surroundings as well as himself. When no attacks followed, there was only one explanation left: his attacks were having an effect. That was both surprising and unusual. Even upon reaching this level, Dallion wasn't supposed to have the strength to stand up to a city guardian, not after the city itself had increased a few levels.

I told you you don't know your own power, Aether said.

*You're doing this?*

*I'm in your realm. That makes me part of you.*

Technically, that wasn't princely true. While Dallion had moved the skill gem to his own domain, he had done so using the Vermillion ring. The item remained very much an item, completely separate from him in any real sense. Then again, magic was the embodiment of exceptions, so it was quite possible that he'd gained some benefits. Whatever the case, Dallion had no intention of staying long enough to find out.

March, go! He said, then leapt to the nearest wall, then made his way towards the empty space that had replaced the roof.

A fountain of void matter emerged from the Overseer in an attempt to cover his exit like an umbrella. One point attack imbued with spark put an end to the attempt, puncturing a hole wide enough for Dallion to comfortably pass through. And just to be on the same side, he turned around and did another point attack in the overseer's direction.

A bit harsh there, dear boy, Nil commented.

I'll take more than that to destroy a city, Dallion said. There was no time for hesitation now. If he wanted to survive this, he had to be merciless and decisive.

All of Dallion's extra instances vanished as he landed on the street. Even so, he didn't stop running. In the corner of his eye, he managed to see March catching up beside him.

Head for the main gate, she shouted. Its easier to deal with the standard soldiers than what the countess has put in the walls.

There was no telling what the last meant, but Dallion decided to take Marchs word on it.

What about Vend?

Hes running interference. The entire city guard and the countess own army are already out to get you. Theyve only stayed back to give room to the Overseer.

Flower pots and roof tiles poured down on the street in front of Dallion. What was more, close to a third of his latest batch of instances tripped in holes and chunks of stone. From this moment on, the entire city was actively trying to kill him in any way possible, and succeeding in thirty percent of the cases. March, on the other hand, didnt seem to have any problems whatsoever, despite running a few steps away.

Whatever the countess order was, it involved only him, not anyone who could help him. At least for now.

Lets just jump over, Dallion shouted as they approached the city gate.

At the current speed, it was going to take less than five seconds to reach the citys exit. However, when it came to awakened, five seconds was a long time. A whole platoon of awakened soldiers emergednot the usual city guards, but the countess crack troops. All of them were armed with battle gear. Even with the soldiers wearing blocker items, Dallion could feel the bloodlust of their weapons.

Ruby, are they using illusions? Dallion thought.

Yes, the shardfly replied.

That was all Dallion needed to hear.

Stay put, he ordered.

The same soldiers had been watching him the entire day. The countess had always planned to double-cross him. Something must have pushed her to act sooner than anticipated. With nobles one could never be sure, but this didnt seem the countess style. It was too chaotic, too uncalculated.

Just as Dallion was about to do a point attack, March did it for him. All the soldiers burst into instances, scattering away from the gate. Wood and steel shattered, leaving Dallion plenty of room to slip through.

Go! March shouted.

No other words were needed. Dallion knew shed give him enough time as possible. So far, no one but Dallion was being attacked, though given how quickly nobles changed their minds, nothing could be taken for granted.

I owe you, Dallion shouted, running into the field area of Nerosal.

The only thing that separated him from freedom was the outer wall. However, as Dallion knew, every good hunter set the trap before poking the prey. It could be said that he had escaped two attempts till now, but that only furthered his concern. A few seconds later, he was proven right.

An entire legion of soldiers was waiting for him, placed on the inside of the second gate. The soldiers weren't as elite as the ones Dallion had just passed through, but they were over level fifty.

That's a bit much for a single awakened, Nil said. Even if it's you.

I guess that means that she knows. Dallion stopped about a thousand feet from the countless legion. And the only way for her to know is for the Star to have told her. He's really throwing everything at me. That must mean he's vulnerable.

*Assumptions have been the downfall of many, dear boy.*

*Only those who can't back it up.*

Dallion Darude, the soldier in front said. Judging by his ornate armor, it was safe to assume he was the one in charge. You've been declared an enemy of the county. Surrender and your life will be spared.

Funny. It was obvious that the man was lying. I'll make you a counteroffer. Let me go through and you'll live.

This was the first time Dallion had made such a threat. The scary part was that it came naturally. Not only did he intend to do so, but he was already using his music skills to spread as much fear as he could.

Several of the soldiers glanced at each other. Some of them might have reacted if the tension wasn't broken by the sound of slow clapping.

A man walked out of the guard station at the gate and made his way forward. It didn't take long for Dallion to see the person who really was in charge: the noble who'd tried to stop him from taking Diron here.

So believable, the noble said. You have me convinced for a moment. But then I remembered that the only thing you're good at is bluffing.

Wasn't one round enough?

The noble laughed. Unlike the soldiers, he wasn't wearing any armor. Dallion couldn't even see any weapon on him. Most likely, he was confident in the combined strength of the soldiers.

You're not even a noble.

I don't have to be. Dallion concentrated. It was time for another first. Did you think that I wouldn't learn new tricks?

Every word combined music skills with zoology and herbology. The plants in the fields around ruffled, filling the air with pollen.

All this time, Ive been careful to play by the rules and people like you kept meddling in, he continued. A series of new sounds were added to the rustling, the sounds of field critters. So many things I could have done, but chose not to.

Slowly, the soldiers stepped back as birds, mice, and other animals rushed towards them. Killing one or even a hundred presented no challenge, but tens of thousands were a different matter.

And now that Im an enemy of the county, I dont have to. Dallion drew his harpsisword.

Waves of creatures swarmed forward, each driven to attack without fear of their own safety. Some of the soldiers tried to fight them off, but they found an unusual number of clumsiness and bad luck had befallen them. Weapons would slip out of their grip, armor elements would snap off... even combat splitting couldnt be relied on. And amidst all that chaos, Dallion calmly walked forward.

Do you really want a round two? He looked the noble in the eyes.

It took only a few seconds for the man to run off.

If he had gone at you, he could have won, Nil said as Dallion continued forward. All of them might have.

Dallion didnt reply. Less than a hundred feet separated him from freedom. The moment he stepped out of the door, hed be in the wilderness, where neither the Overseer, nor the countess would have any power over him.

Twice Dallion tapped the blade of the harpsisword in the side of his boot, ready in case the Overseer decided to appear. Two steps away from the threshold, she finally did.

I cant let you go, Dal, she said in a calm voice. I dont have a choice.

I know. But the countess does. Dallion stopped. Every plan and creature in the city will go on a brainless rampage, as will the item guardians. You might control the area, but not its contents.

Youre not strong enough to command that many animals.

I am. Ive had each one spread my music skills on. Its a thing thatll only work once, but itll be enough to display weakness the noble who aimed to become an Archduke losing her own capital. She should have waited.

The countess knows what youve got, Dal. Shell hunt you down.

She wont, but shes welcome to. Ive no interest in her, just the Star. Unless she wants to fall along with him, shell let me go.

For several long seconds, Dallion and Overseer remained, facing one another. Then the Overseer stepped aside, letting him pass.

Thanks. Dallion walked past. Behind him, the swarms of creatures slowly started losing their aggressiveness. The offer had been accepted, but had earned Dallion a rather dangerous enemy.

## Chapter 630: Banished

When in the wilderness it was said that hunters fell into only two categories: hunting or hunted. Right now, Dallion was both and neither. The countess, and possibly mercenaries of the Archduke, were after him, although not really. With open conflict on the horizon, both sides were conserving

their strength for the big battle. None of them would go out of their way and waste effort on Dallion, as long as he didnt venture into any of their domains.

As for Dallion himself, he had set off to hunt down the Star, though without a clue where to start. The people he had asked for assistance were either clueless or hadnt gotten back to him. Nil assured Dallion that both Hannah and March would keep in touch through the echos creator, though there was no telling when that might happen. All that was left to do was to hope it happened fast.

A wild deer slowly made its way towards Dallions campfire. The creature had been strongly influenced by the curiosity that was streaming out from Dallion, playing his harpsisword. There was some irony in the fact that the melody attracting the creature was also preemptively mourning its death.

Step by step the animal approached, stopping five feet from Dallion. With one swift action, Dallion then sliced its head off before the deer could even catch what was going on. Moments later, the lifeless corpse fell to the ground.

Youve become quite proficient, dear boy, Nil said, as Dallion proceeded to remove the skin and then butcher the animal.

Dallion didnt respond. He knew this to be an attempt for the echo to start a conversation.

Im fine, Nil, he said. Its not the first time I kill for food.

*Its the first time you kill in this fashion. In the past, you always gave the prey a chance.*

No, I didnt. I just didnt lure them to me. No common creature had a chance against a high-level awakened, and the echo knew it. I cant waste time.

*Thats not true, either. You have no idea where the Star is. None whatsoever. Spending a few hours hunting wouldnt have changed anything at all.*

That was correct, but Dallion didnt feel like actively hunting. For some reason, it felt like a waste of time. Strangely enough, just waiting didnt.

Any news on the general?

Not since last you asked, Nil sighed. Hannah is aware of the situation. When theres something, shell tell my original and when she does, Ill tell you.

But you still dont know what Adzorg is up to.

*As serious as your situation is, there are other events in the world as well. If my original didnt have a need to block my knowledge of his doings he wouldnt have gone through the effort. Spells dont just spontaneously occur, you know.*

I can tell you where the Star is. The aetherbird joined the conversation. Ill even teach you about magic.

Dallion ignored the offer. Lately, the aetherbird had become more and more insistent. The more desperate things became, the more it took the opportunity to remind Dallion about how everything could be turned around. The worst thing was that Aether was right. All Dallion had to do was use



the gem, and he'd gain the skill to craft spells, as well as a lot of information to boot. The consequences weren't worth it. In several aspects, the aetherbird was starting to sound like the Star. Then again, given the time difference, it had probably already spent half an eternity locked within the realm of its own skill gem.

The deer tasted adequately. Cooking was one set of skills that Dallion hadn't improved in despite vowing to do so. He knew a few basic tricks, which he rarely used. Right now, food was only seen as fuel, but not so much for existing than for leveling up.

While the rest of the deer meat roasted, Dallion grabbed his belt buckle and entered the awakening realm. With so few guardian items left, he was forced to use what he had at hand to improve his skills. Thinking back, it would have been nice to grab something from Nerosal while fleeing, maybe even a pebble. In the wilderness, even stones were void.

The combat was quick and boring. What years ago would have taken weeks and extreme effort was not done in a matter of true time minutes. It was only after improving the item to gold that any challenge appeared. Reaching platinum, Dallion stopped. There was no point in pushing beyond. According to Nil, and all the scrolls Dallion had read on the subject, improving something to a magical metal required tremendous effort even for nobles. Since the goal was only to max out his art skills, it was a lot more efficient to merely improve several items to platinum, instead.

Sixty-two improvements later and the goal was achieved: six of Dallion's skills had hit the level eighty cap. Of the remaining four, only the scholarly skills had a chance of going higher. For forging, Dallion needed a forge, and as for herbalism and zoology, it was unlikely he'd come upon any new creatures in the area.

You're in a good position, Nil said once Dallion had returned to the real world. You've done all that's possible. The remaining skills won't have an effect in realm combat.

The whole speech was supposed to be reassuring, but it had the opposite effect. In order for the battle to take place, Dallion was going to have to get close to the Star and then trigger the artifact. Last time, the Stat had someone hidden in his own realm, taking care of that problem. In the upcoming fight, Dallion needed to take the initiative.

After the last of the deer was eaten, Dallion burned everything that was left of the animal, then buried the remains along with the fire. Then he continued on in the wilderness. To the untrained eye, it seemed like he was wandering about aimlessly, but in truth there was a very specific plan, at least for the immediate future. It was only a matter of time before the usual mercenaries made an appearance. The gorgon duo were a given, as were most of those sent by other Archdukes in the empire. The big question remained Countess Priscord. She was aware of the skill gem Dallion held the invaluable item that wasn't supposed to exist. It alone had the power to provide what nothing else in the world could: the ability to cast spells even for those who didn't have the trait. Seeing what had happened with Diroh, there even was a chance that a non-awakened could eventually gain the ability. However, just because the countess wanted the item so much was also the reason why she might want to divert all attention away from Dallion. It was obvious that he wasn't going to use it since he hadn't so far so leaving him along was the best course of action.

Has this all happened before? Dallion wondered.

Thinking back, Eurys mentor had received minor punishment, considering what hed done. Having ones name erased wasnt such a big deal for a hunter. True, a renowned hunter could demand a lot more money, but even a non-name hunter could make more than enough by most standards.

He knew about you, didnt he? Dallion asked.

*The hunter was a walking bag of issues. Its a miracle he reached the level that he did. He was a good strategist, but little else.*

Youll probably say the same about me.

*You dont know what the term strategy means. Your lucky draw is being an otherworlder.*

At sunset, Dallion changed direction again, heading south. So far, he had managed to avoid any wandering armies. With events to the north escalating to a full out war, it was normal for the empire to divert their attention. There was no telling what the Order would do, though. Up to now, they had been surprisingly neutral in many ways. Dallion still had no idea whether they despised him or wanted to recruit him. They had saved his life back in Nerosal, letting him stay with them undisturbed, while they didnt have to. The countess couldnt be pleased, but she knew better than to act on her anger. Going against the Order was the same as going against the Academy, or the emperor himself.

As night fell, all seven Moons shone in the sky. Also, the faint flickering of lightning became visible on the east horizon. Somewhere beyond the empires borders, a battle was raging between furies and some unspecified enemy. If cloud forts had made an advance all the way here, it was only a matter of time before the Wetie province was also engulfed in war. That wasnt the best timing for the countess, for the emperor was more likely to tolerate the status quo, until the external threat was dealt with, at least.

Interestingly enough, a cutling decided to make its presence known. Possibly attracted by Dallions presence, it had decided to defend its territory. That proved to be a costly mistake. Three precise hits were all it took for the creature to get destroyed. Dallion had even used his Nox dagger to kill it off, after mortally wounding it with several spark infused strikes of his harpsisword. To his fortune, the kill proved enough for Nox to raise by another level, making him eight. The puma was quite pleased about it, as was Luxthe firebird never missed an occasion to support his older brother. Naturally, Aether also used the occasion to teach Dallion the ability to capture more familiars.

Ill can tell you how to bring back your shardfly, Aether said

This instantly struck a chord, causing Dallion to stop mid-step.

Theres a way?

*With magic, there usually is. Just like you, your crackling gave you a way to unseal people. Magic can let you do other things. Youll need to boost your trait a bit before you do, but I think you knew that already.*

There was no indication that the aetherbird was lying, though even if it were, Dallion wouldnt be able to tell. The possibility was enough to make him hesitate.

*Guardians dont die. But that doesnt mean its easy to bring them back. Free me and Ill do it on the spot.*

Youve said similar things before.

*I vow in my Moon. Is that enough to convince you?*

Dallion didnt reply.

*Ill give you a day to think about it.*

I thought you werent petty.

*Im petty as can be. In this case, Im presenting a choice. You cant kick this down the road. Decide now, or forget it. Either way is fine with me. Ive waited longer before. Besides, the Moons are right about you. Youre interesting.*

Flattery?

*Otherlanders in general. You, like the Star, like to create your own rules.*

Im not like that. Dallion hissed through clenched teeth.

*Not yet. Youve been creating your own rules lately. Your power is starting to show, isnt it? Thats the thing about you. The only way you fit in is to make everything snap to you and create a new picture. Anyway, take your time, but remember clock is ticking.*

A hundred answers appeared in Dallions mind. He was tempted to combat split and voice all of them. Ultimately, he didnt. There was still time for him to make a decision. Before that, he planned to give someone else a choiceone with a lot fewer prospects.

Ruby, let me know if you spot any illusions. Dallion rushed forward.

Sprinting was said to arguably be the least effective way of running. That was only true for non-awakened. At the current level of his body trait, Dallion could cross considerable distances without getting tired. That was what he did the entire night.

Shortly after dawn, the running came to an end. The buffer was enough to confuse and delay anyone following. From here on, all that was left was a nice long walk to the village Dallion had planned to visit.