

Leveling up 101

Chapter 101: Shadow Guardian

Jump on Vend! Dallion leapt in the direction.

He had to be careful not to destroy the echo in the process, while also making sure to cover as much of his body as possible. Thankfully, a set of green markers appeared suggesting how to achieve that in optimal fashion. This single event brought Dallion to an unexpected realization, one that he had internally been avoiding—he was abysmally unprepared when it came to anything related to the awakened world. So many people had given him so many chances to learn, and all he had done was stubbornly push on in his own way, disregarding any advice. Succeed or fail, once this trial was over, he was going to change things. Of course, Dallion strongly wanted to succeed.

Falkner, Cellano, fight them off! Dallion shouted. Everyone else, help me protect Vend!

Thankfully, the echo was perfectly aware of what was going on, so curled up in a ball on the floor to accommodate their efforts.

Minor wound rectangles flashed about several of the party members as the shardflies swarmed through them. Similar to their name, the insects were like butterflies with wings of rock, and very sharp edges, as several people could attest.

Nox, help out! Dallion whispered. Just don't get killed.

The moment he did, the crackling popped into existence. Silently it leapt to the side, then looked up at the fluttering stone insects. Like any cat, it paused a few moments before jumping up, claws extended. With one scratch, several shardlings broke down, falling to the floor like stones. Even better, as the embodiment of a crack, the puma cub didn't even have to use its claws—everything it touched instantly got hurt.

While the crackling was doing its part to help, the rest of the party were busy fighting battles of their own. Relying on his massive spin attacks, Cellano slashed wave after wave, only to have more insects take their place. Falkner was attempting a more refined approach, piercing the creatures one by one at incredible speed.

Stones rained over Dallion like hail.

Are you done with them? Arthurows asked. He had piled onto Dallion, covering them both with a tower shield.

Getting there, Cellano replied.

It took several more minutes for all the pests to be eliminated. By the time it was all over, everyone in the group had lost between ten and twenty-five percent of their health. Fortunately, Vend had suffered no harm.

All clear, Bel said. Unlike the rest, she had moved away from the hotspot the moment the swarm had gathered, using her throwing knives to take out as many as she could from a distance. That had kept her health generally high. You guys okay?

Vanish, Dallion whispered. The crackling understood him, instantly disappearing from the scene.

Thats a bit rude, Arthurows laughed. Give me a moment. He moved off, allowing Dallion to stand up.

Congratulations, Vend said. This is usually the part where most fail. Given youve passed this choke point, its almost certain youll clear the level.

Thanks, Dallion mumbled. The fact that the echo hadnt said they would pass the entire trial, had him worried. Everyone okay with a few minutes rest?

Dallion took a few steps away and examined his clothes. The armor had done a pretty good job protecting him. Eury had done quite an excellent job making it. When earned enough money, he would definitely buy something more. That was once he paid off his current debt.

It was good to note that all the damage inflicted on any item was instantly gone. That was the good thing about objects in the awakened realmsthings never broke here. Even so, Dallion made a note to double check on that in his library. From now on, he had decided never to take things for granted.

Good thing they didnt merge, Falkner said. Would have been nasty, back then.

Yeah, would have. Dallion nodded, still deep in thought. Everything fine with you, Cellano?

Ive faced worse. The large one said, even as he was gasping for air. Swinging a sword for minutes non-stop was stressful, regardless of what level his body was. In contrast, Falkner seemed rested.

You know, host trials Ive been in before werent this intense, Arthurows put his shield away in the nothingness. Why the change?

Saying youve failed easier trials isnt a confidence booster, Art. Vend sighed. Selection is set by the captains and the guild master. After were done, you can go ask them.

Did March make the decision?

The air suddenly became tense. Everyone paused whatever they were doing, keeping their ears peeled for the answer.

Thats not for me to say, Vend replied after a while. And youd better focus on your present challenge, you still have a guardian to defeat.

Without further explanations, the echo moved forward. Before Dallion could say the word, Bel and Falkner quickly joined in. Cellano followed shortly after.

You okay? Dallion asked.

Yeah, alls fine. Arthurows smiled in a fashion that could be interpreted to mean anything. Dont worry about it. Weve been going through this for so long that were just tired of one another.

Right. Dallion didnt believe that for a moment. However, there was a lot of truth in what Vend had said. They did still have a guardian to defeat, two even.

There were no surprises in the next fifteen minutes. Every now and again, a wave of tooth roaches would emerge, along with the occasional patch of shardflies. Now that the group knew what to expect, dispatching the enemy proved no issue.

It was interesting to note that the attack pattern was very different from the previous level. Instead of charging, the creatures here were more the sneaky type. If the key to the first level was quick reaction, here, perception was vital.

The guardian chamber is up ahead, Falkner said. I cant see what it is from here.

I dont think you will. Dallion said. I think its on the ceiling.

You think its a shardfly? Bel asked.

No, but itll be something similar.

I might be wrong, but I think the levels are based on awakened attributes, he explained. Level one was all about speed and reflexes. This one seems to be all about perception.

Thats a stretch, Arthurows laughed. So, youre saying that whatever we face will be difficult to spot? Might be.

Or maybe its something that could target out weak spots? Falkner suggested. That involves perception too. Or maybe both?

Something precise and invisible, Arthurows mused. Sounds like fun. How do we deal with it? He looked at Dallion.

Falkner, what guardians do you know that could hang from the ceiling? he asked.

Err, theres a lot of them.

Something that could make use of perception, so possibly ranged attacks.

Not sure about ranged, but scyllas are good at precise attacks, and they could hang from the ceiling.

Good. So, whats a scylla?

Several people of the group smirked. Dallion could almost hear country bumpkin based on their expressions alone.

Its Falkner began and stopped. Its difficult to explain. Its like a large spider with spikes on its legs?

Like a blade spider? Dallion asked. Of all the guardians he had fought so far, that was the closest example he could think of. Judging by the uncertain smile on Falkners face, he was way off.

Yeah a bit like that, just much larger, and prefers attacking from the ceiling. It likes to surprise people, though its not difficult to spot if you know where to look. Ive never heard of a Scylla being a guardian of an item, though. Usually they are area guardians.

This isnt an ordinary item, Bel reminded. Here everything goes.

A spider, Dallion started thinking through the options. The tactics that had been used against the leopard would do no good here. A spider creature could fight off multiple attacks at once without a problem. Given the usual size of a guardian in this item, a direct attack was also unadvisable. Therefore, there was one remaining solution shielded ranged attacks.

I think I have something, Dallion said. Whats the scyllas reach?

Depends on the Scylla. Falkner thought for a few moments. Ten feet? Maybe twenty?

Twenty feet. Well have to split up in groups. Two by two one ranged, one guard. We attack the guardian from a distance. Ive no idea how fast it would be, so well have to keep moving all the time.

Two pairs, Arthurows nodded. Cel, howre you at guarding?

The other grunted, suggesting it wasnt his strong point. That made things much more difficult. Dallion wasnt a particularly good guard either, not with a buckler any way.

Art, you go with Bel, Dallion instructed. Ill be with Falkner. Cellano, you be you attack anything you can.

The pairing seemed to be good enough for most. Arthurows had nothing against teaming up with Bel, and as for Falkner, he had been doing everything possible to get on Dallions good side ever since they met. It was no mystery that he hoped that would get him somehow closer to March.

What about Vend? Bel asked. Wholl be protecting him?

As long as he remains in the tunnel, it shouldnt be an issue. Weve already killed everything along the way, and the guardian cant leave the arena. Can it?

No, Vend said. Nothing will happen to me if I remain here. Thats why I said that youve passed this level. As long as you defeat the guardian, youre good for the next level. He went over and leaned against the nearest column. One piece of advice. Just because Im not with you, doesnt mean I cant see whats going on. Keep that in mind.

Did that mean there was a way for someone to see within an item without actually going? Most likely not. Such an ability was too big a game changer to remain secret. However, it did pose an interesting question. If a person could see a short distance off, could a guardian do the same?

Everyone ready? Dallion looked at the rest of his group. Silent nods followed. Shields and ranged only, he reminded the group. Falkner and I go in running. The rest wait a bit and join us.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion rushed into the guardian chamber. His hopes were that appearing first would distract the scylla enough so that the second group, along with Cellano, could attack from behind.

Several steps in the chamber, the plan changed. Falkner had been right: the guardian wasn't difficult to spot, occupying almost an eighth of the ceiling. If Dallion imagined was going to face an overgrown spider, those thoughts were now gone.

LEVEL 2 GUARDIAN

Species: Shadow Scylla

Class: Shadow

Statistics: 100% HP

More silhouette than creature, the guardian looked like a cross between a chainsaw and an octopus. Large spikes emerged and disappeared from its tar-like surface, while eight massive legs held onto the ceiling. The closest thing Dallion had seen to a creature of this nature was the chainling, and from what he remembered from that encounter normal ranged attacks didn't work.

Falkner, Dallion whispered, hiding as much as he could behind his buckler. When you read about this type of guardian, did it specify how to kill them?

Yep, the boy whispered back. You have to aim for the eyes.

Aim for the eyes? That sounded reasonable. Only problem was that Dallion didn't see any eyes, none at all.

Chapter 102: Aim for the eyes

Three more bolts sank into the body of the guardian, yet its health remained at a hundred percent. Whatever the creature was, fighting it with conventional methods proved ineffective. Even Falkner was puzzled by the outcome. According to the boy, ranged weapons were supposed to deal just as much damage they would deal to any other creature. And yet, they clearly didn't.

Split up! Dallion shouted. The one weakness he had managed to spot, thanks to Cellano, was that the scylla preferred to have five legs or more attached to the ceiling. Despite frequent opportunities, it had allowed itself to attack with half its legs only once. Make it stretch a bit.

There always was the option for Dallion to use music. As long as he remained on the opposite side of the hall, the scylla wasn't going to target him. However, the experience from the previous guardian encounter was far too fresh. Each time he thought about drawing his harpsisword, the pain in his head returned. The feeling was so intense, that for a moment Dallion wondered if he hadn't acquired a new limiting echo somehow.

Try aiming for the end of its legs, Dallion shouted. Maybe we can get it to fall off the ceiling.

Already tried that, Bel yelled back. Doesn't work.

Not to pressure you or anything, but we won't be able to evade forever, Arthurows said. What do we do?

It had to be something related to the items current level. Dallion had guessed correctly that the guardian was linked to the perception attribute. Maybe there was a hint in the class? That was the only information available.

When Dallion was at a safe distance, he focused on the scylla, using his music skills. At first there was nothing, as if the darkness had swallowed any emotions the creature might have. It was as if he was staring at a blob of tar come to life. After a few seconds, though, faint blue lines began to emerge. Like veins, they spread from a spot on the belly of the creature to the very extremities of its legs. Strangely enough, the only emotion that Dallion could feel was absolute calm, as if the creature was sleeping.

Holding his breath, Dallion pulled the harpsiswords string. A blue marker appeared. Thankfully, so far there wasn't any sign of a headache. Taking advantage of the fact, Dallion waited until the precise moment, then played the string again. The guardian froze. The heart pulsed twice, sending colored pulses down the legs. That was new. Encouraged by the hint, Dallion waited and played the string again, and again. Each time, the pulsing of the heart increased. At the fifth time, the organ sprouted like a rose. Vibrant blue colors filled the inside of the creature, merging into a mix of gratitude and desire for battle. Before Dallion's very eyes, a humanoid form of a nymph appeared within the mass of tar. The legs moved back, becoming snake-like tentacles on the creature's back, as the tall elegant creature stepped onto the floor of the chamber like a ballerina.

Looking at Dallion, the guardian smiled. Two things made an immediate impression: a series of large eyes had appeared scattered all over the nymph's body; also the nymph was male.

COMBAT INITIATED

You gotta be kidding me! Cellano shouted. The battle starts now?

Go for the eyes! Dallion quickly let go of the harpsisword with one hand, as he drew the dartbow. With markers being shared between party members, all he needed to do was to target the eyes and the rest would take care of things.

Weak spot marks emerged on several of the eyes, just as predicted. Unfortunately, the scylla had no intention of letting himself be hit that easily. Two of the black tentacles darted in the direction of Dallion. It was only thanks to Arthurows quick reaction that the attack was blocked.

Shoot! Dallion shouted, moving back. With Arthurows in the way he no longer had a clear line of sight. Thankfully, that no longer mattered. Having had a glimpse of the enemys weak spots, the rest of the party jumped into action.

Cellano was the first to act, rushing forward as a human hatchet, taking the guardian head on. While not nearly as ineffective, each of his strikes managed to chip off a few percent of the scyllas health. Thrilled by the experience, the guardian pulled back its tentacles, attacking the young man with all four of them. The remaining four moved about in chaotic fashion, forming a makeshift shield. Even so, every now and again eyes would open and close all over his body in a mesmerizingly disturbing fashion.

Careful there, Arthurows said. Hes stronger than he looks!

At this distance, what could he do? Dallion asked and instantly regretted it. One of the things he had noticed in this world, that jinxing was pretty much a law of nature. No sooner had he asked the question than two of the scyllas tentacles splashed on the ground, transforming into a mischief of toothroaches.

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RITICAL SHOT

Weak spot found!

Dealt damage was increased by 150%

The hit quickly reduced the guardians health by fifteen percent, forcing him to back away, using the rats as a defensive ring around him. With that and the previous attacks, there was only about two-thirds health. No, less than that for some reason even the health continued to slowly decrease even without anyone hitting it.

Hit the he began.

Kill the toothroaches! Falkner shouted, interrupting Dallion. They are still part of him!

It was slightly disappointing that the boy had managed to steal Dallions suggestion, but in the grand scope of things it didnt matter. Even so, Dallion decided to one-up him.

Cut the other tentacles! That way you'll see the weak spots better.

The final all out attack commenced. Eager to get some melee practice with his new weapon, Dallion took the harpsword once more and charged forward. Everyone was following markers at this point, some effortlessly, others without even looking. Dallion was neither of these categories. While he had memorized quite a few guard patterns, attacks still required for him to rely on the tutorial.

It took him five seconds to get into position, then pick a strike that wouldn't mesh with anyone else's. The whole experience was a combination of cat's cradle and reverse Jenga with Dallion trying to hit a weak spot before anyone else could. Alas for him, he failed. Bel and Falkner were the clear winners, hitting whatever target they wished from a distance, while Cellano dealt with the tentacles one by one.

In less than a minute, the scylla's health had reached ten percent.

Surrender, Dallion shouted.

The guardian looked at him with a combination of thanks and amusement, but simply kept on fighting. It was clear to everyone that he was continuing a losing battle, but for some reason, he refused to give up. Soon enough the expected rectangle appeared.

DAGGER Level 2 has been cleared!

Claim your focus that suits you best and continue on to fulfil the DAGGER's destiny!

That was a bit anticlimactic, Arthurows said, as he made his way to the reward rectangle. He had been the only member of the party not to deal any damage, and still the first to head in and claim his reward.

I guess because he was an item scylla, Falkner explained. Usually, they're much tougher than this.

That was true. In Dallion's view, the fight had been far too easy. Except for the initial hiccup, they had defeated the enemy far too easy, and it wasn't because of his use of music skills. Something had kept the guardian from going all out.

Not bad. Vend approached once the action was over. Of course, you could have just made enough noise to wake the guardian up. You were right that the focus of this level was perception, though you failed to make use of that. Perception is not only sight.

We'll keep that in mind, sir, Arthurows replied in his casual fashion. Any hints for the next one?

Sure. Don't mess up. Failing so close to the end hurts a lot.

As the rest of the party went to claim their level rewards, Dallion stayed behind.

Vend, he began. Why is the rest so structured?

What do you mean?

The patterns, the levels based on awakened focus, the fact that the guardians don't go all out. Both this one and the leopard could have done a lot more damage, and they didn't. It was almost as if they had an echo limiting them.

A guardian with an echo. Vend laughed. That's a good one. You're right, though. Nothing serious is expected to happen to any of you during the trial. There's not much we know about the sphere items, but some of them are better known than others. The Academy had determined the daggers to be

training artefacts. The theory goes that the people before used them to prepare the children for the real thing. Given what's involved, we assume that the times had been much more violent back then. Since the tests and guardians are simple enough, a lot of guilds buy some of them to use for trial purposes.

That still wasn't a complete answer to Dallion's question, but it had to do for the moment.

Then why give them out if they are fully cleared?

Because then they stop being a trial realm. Once all levels are unsealed, the item fulfills its destiny and becomes an ordinary item. Actually, it becomes slightly worse. While the item itself is almost unbreakable, it's hollow.

Hollow? The first thing Dallion imagined was one of those chocolate figurines wrapped in foil. They looked quite nice on the outside, but inside had nothing but air.

They don't have a guardian inside. Once completed, you get this whole realm, rivaling that of a building, but it's completely empty. Most often people use them to place echoes for further training. The pyramid you entered during your battle with March used to be such an artifact. Captain Adzorg modified it to what you got to see.

Sphere artifacts didn't have guardians? That felt slightly weird, though not as much as Vend made it out to be; possibly because as someone born on Earth, Dallion didn't find items without guardians all that strange. Even so, in a world in which every object had a conscience, this probably was the equivalent of an item carcass.

Thanks. Dallion nodded, then went to reclaim his level two reward.

As before, five options were presented to him; and just as before, Dallion picked the mysterious grey one. Four down, sixteen to go.

Chapter 103: Copyettes

The third level was quite different from the ones before. Stone gave way to veins of raw quartz emerging from walls and columns alike. Only the floor remained the same old path of grey stone. No one said a word upon entering the first chamber. Everyone in the party knew that this was their final trial. The next guardian would determine whether they would earn a mentor or would remain solo until the next selection.

Dallion, too, was wondering what the final outcome would be. Judging by the way Vend had reacted to his harpsichord headache, the man clearly knew a thing or two about the skills and also was far less stuffy than the Adzorg's echo. Getting him as a mentor, or pretty much anyone of that caliber, would be a huge benefit.

No doubt being in a city very different from life in Dherma village. When Dallion had initially awakened, it had taken him a total of three days to discover everything there was. Nerosal, on the other hand, remained enormous, and not only in terms of city size. There were so many things that Dallion hadn't even imagined, more than the glimpses he had seen in Aspion's memories. He could only speculate how many more layers existed.

I see something, Falkner whispered, as he stopped, hand raised. Dallion had taken the time to teach him a few military signs to keep the entire cave from learning what they were doing. It was refreshing how quick the rest of the group had picked up on his advice. If Dallion had been with such a

group of newbies when playing online games, he would have reached the top leagues in a matter of days.

Arthurows summoned his shield. The rest also drew their weapons.

Its hiding behind the columns, Falkner continued. I cant tell what it is from this distance.

What do you think? Cellano turned to Dallion. After the last guardian encounter, even he had started treating him as the party leader a role Dallion felt unexpectedly comfortable with.

"Its not fast, and its not hidden, so it must be smart, Dallion said. Any idea what smart creatures could be out there?

Thats a bit vague, Bel noted. Lots of things have high mind levels.

Copyettes, Arthurows said. Has to be copyettes.

Copyettes? Dallion blinked. If this was what he was thinking it was, there might be serious problems.

Come on, Bel snorted. Mimics can only be guardians. Theres no way well be facing a copyette here.

There have been sightings. Besides, this is a sphere item. Everythings possible.

Give it a break with the conspiracy theories, Bel smirked. All copyette sightings have been debunked. And how come its always one person whos seen one?

Just because its a conspiracy doesnt mean it isnt true. They are out there, youre just too closed minded to see.

Yeah. Next, youll be saying that theyre walking among us, right?

Arthurows didnt reply, but it was no secret he wasnt happy. If it wasnt for the present danger, no doubt more words would be exchanged. There was no guarantee that an argument would break out even now. Arthurows was currently biding his time, but Dallion had seen far too many MMO flame wars break out to know where this was going, he also knew he had to act.

Seriously, what are copyettes? he raised his voice just a fraction.

Everyone except Vend looked at him with momentary uncertainty. A few seconds later, Arthurows facial muscles relaxed.

They are one of the imprisoned races, Arthurows began. You know how each race was created by one of the Seven Moons?

Dallion nodded. That much he had read.

The copyettes were one of those races. Since they had the gift of magic, they were pretty powerful, and because of that they wanted more. Each decade they would increase their domains by subjugating more and more of the other races, but that wasnt enough. Wanting to take over the world, they started systematically conquering city after city, until everyone else formed an alliance against them. The War of Disparity in which hundreds of minor and higher nobles merged into one won. The Empire was born, and the copyettes were sentenced to be forever imprisoned within the awakened realms, cursed to live there as item guardians. However, not all of them were caught.

Bullcrap, Bel grumbled. They were. End of story.

Theres talk that a few of them managed to escape capture and have been hiding in the real world ever since, Arthurows ignored her. Desperate they made a deal with the Twisted Star and are now plotting ways to free their race from the items they are imprisoned in. Thats why now and again theres evidence of copyettes roaming the awakened realms freely, praying on awakened.

They are shapeshifters, Cellano said, annoyed.

Way to ruin my presentation. Arthurows gave him a glance. But yes, they are creatures that could become anything within a certain size-range. They can become you, me, a five-foot sword he waved his free hand. Thats whats so scary about them. You never know when ones among you until its too late.

They are nothing but a high-powered guardian, Bel said. Some people use them as an excuse for everything. Including failing the selection exam five times in a row.

I never said I failed the exam because of them. Im just saying that they might be there, and that they were chosen by the Moon of mind.

So, if it isnt one of those, any ideas what else it might be? Dallion changed the subject. Something thats smart and acts the way it does?

No one seemed to have any idea. Arthurows shrugged, and Falkner just shook his head.

Okay, if we cant be sure, we go in as a group. Arthurows is with Vend, everyone else, stick close. Even if it isnt a copyette, I dont want anyone charging off on their own. Falkner got a brief glance. Lets go slowly.

The team advanced step by step. With each step, Dallion was ready to shout out orders depending on the type of creature they came across. In his mind, he was still thinking about the shapeshifter. If there really was such a creature, they were in serious trouble. Dallion wasnt worried so much that it might become one of the group. Rather, he feared it might copy Vend. With the examiner being one of the tests fail conditions, no one would risk harming him out of fear it might bring the end of the test.

There. Falkner pointed.

Dallion winced. Although the cave was well lit, he couldnt see what the boy was referring to. The column Falkner was pointing at was there, yet that was all.

I see him too, Arthurows added. Scrawny critter.

What is it? Dallion asked.

Havent seen one of those before. Must be something unique to the item or a copyette, he said deliberately to annoy Bel.

Falkner, if you can hit it from here, go for it.

The moment Falkner raised his dartbow, several nearby columns crumbled to pieces. Rather, that was incorrect; they didnt crumble to pieces they crumbled to goblins. Five groups of about a dozen each landed on the floor like large enemy patches surrounding the group entirely.

Get Ven in the middle! Dallion shouted.

An ambush? This was bad. He hadn't expected the creatures to be this well organized, though thinking about it, he should have been. If this was the level focusing on mind, they would be just as smart as an awakened, maybe more. Of course, they would come up with something to obtain the advantage. The creature Falkner had spotted hadn't been there at random it had been the lure, and the group had fallen in its trap.

Cellano, you're up! Everyone else, back-to-back with Vend in the middle!

Desperate times called for desperate tactics. One good charge, or a single area-based attack, had every chance of eliminating the entire party, but until then they had a chance.

Take a few hits if you have to! Dallion drew his harpsisword.

With these numbers of enemies, it was going to prove more effective than a dartbow. The rest shared his opinion, for they did the same. Even Bel took out a pair of daggers he had never seen her use before. Of course, Arthurows was the big surprise summoning a two part-sword which looked remarkably similar to the one Dallion had seen in the hands of Dame Vesuvia. The only difference was that Arthurows split his in two, holding each in one hand.

A ring of red and green markers filled the area around the group. Then the goblin hordes charged. Defend and counterattack, that was the only way victory could be gained. Initially, the exercise was difficult every member had to adjust to the actions of everyone else. Thankfully, that's where the markers came into play. Being able to see the attack and defend options of the rest, Dallion along with everyone else had the freedom to do what he thought best within the confines of his own combat space. It was almost like breakdancing in a group.

The more goblins came, the better the coordination between party members got. While clunky at first, they quickly adapted to the new dynamics, building the actions of their party members.

Dallion swung his weapon along a wide arc as Bel followed up, throwing a host of knives at the enemies that were out of reach. In game terms, Dallion provided her with space, and in return she gave him time to perform another arc slash without fearing damage.

Falkner and Arthurows had formed another team in their own unique fashion. At first glance there seemed to be no logic or coordination between their actions, each striking enemies at random while skipping others. After ten seconds, though, one would notice that none of the goblins had managed to perform a single strike.

And in the middle of all that stood Vends echo, observing with an academic, almost bored expression. Every now and again, his lips would twitch, as he itched to give advice on how to deal with the situation, but restraining himself so as not to ruin the test.

Meanwhile, Cellano was a thing of his own. The epitome of a solo player, if there was one, he hacked and slashed his way through the goblin packs, largely aided by the fact that they had little interest in him. Not only were the creatures proven they could be cunning, but they had worked out that killing Vend would bring them victory. To achieve this, they had all rushed towards the main group, avoiding Cellano altogether.

As the fight continued, though, one thing kept bothering Dallion.

Can anyone see what creatures they are? he shouted, while doing another arc slash.

The goblins had been reduced by two-thirds since the original ambush, and yet Dallion had yet to see a white rectangle.

Goblins, though no idea what type, Bel shouted back.

Why isnt there any rectangle?

No idea.

Try to leave one alive.

The fighting continued. As the goblins decreased, their tactics changed. No longer relying on superior strength, they copied the partys approach, forming groups of five that mutually protected each other while simultaneously attacking. It wasnt a bad approach, but the enemies lacked both in skill and ferocity.

Falkner, go help Cellano mop up the rest, Dallion shouted. The rest of us will keep up the ring of protection. Remember, leave one breathing!

Okay. the boy leapt forward, slicing two groups of goblins as he did so. His skills were outright scary. Dallion, Bel, and Arthurows quickly filled in the gap.

Nice approach, though capturing one isnt part of the test, Vend said. I can tell you what youre fighting if you want.

And that wont cause us to fail? Dallion asked, suspicious of the sudden offer.

Its not like you wont find out soon enough. Arthurows was right. Youre fighting against a copyette.

Time seemed to stop as all three party members froze at those words. Even Arthurows remained petrified, as if surprised that his theory had turned out to be true.

Good job. They wont be able to surprise you anymore. With this youve pretty much made your way to the end of level three. All you need to do is to defeat the guardian and youll have passed the selection trial.

Chapter 104: The Imprisoned Species

The news that they were facing a copyette had its impact on the group. Dallion wasnt that alarmed, but the others definitely were. It could be seen in their actions and behavior, resulting in a significant drop in combat efficiency. There had been several more ambushes as the group made their way towards the guardian chamber. At this point, no one bothered to count. Not that it matteredthe creatures were intelligent enough to merge into several groups before attacking.

Copyettes Dallion had only the most basic knowledge about them. Up till now, all he knew was that they were one of the seven species of the world. The part about them being imprisoned, or even the fact that an entire species could be imprisoned, was absolutely new to him. It was also terrifying. So far, almost everything Dallion had seen of the world was much better than Earthlife appeared much

simpler in a good way, as if he were living in a fairytale. However, now and then Dallion could see things that hinted of a much darker picture beneath the surface.

Because they had tried to take over the world, the copyettes had been cursed to be scattered and exist only in thousands of awakened realms as guardians. Dallion had no idea what it took to achieve this, but it sounded as outright terrifying.

Normally, a person would never come across a copyette. To face them, one had to enter the awakened realm of an area the size of a county. However, every so often one would appear in an ancient artifact. And now they had.

There it is, Arthurows broke the silence. Whats the plan?

Dallion didnt reply at once. If the copyette was capable of magic, as the rest claimed, entering a group would be a terrible idea. One even moderately powerful area of effect spell and the trial would be over.

How many people have tried to complete this dagger? Dallion turned to Vend.

No idea. It was at level two, when the guild bought it. Id say six-seven groups have tried after that.

We do it like last time, Dallion said. I go there alone, then the rest of you attack it from behind. Since its intelligent, it will be expecting a trap, so thats what well give it. When you charge in, itll probably do something to face you. Then Ill attack. Thatll catch it off guard for a moment. Then you have to finish it.

Thats risky, Cellano said. What if it changes into you? How can we tell you apart?

Ill target its head. We can see each others markers, so youll know which is the real me. Just be sure to target it as you charge in. I dont want to wonder whether youre you.

Are you sure itll talk to you? Falkner asked.

It will. Dallion took the harpsisword off his back. Theres always something to say.

Dallion gave Vend a quick glance. There was no indication whether the echo was approving or not of his action. The only thing it did was to nod, expecting him to proceed.

Halfway to the chambers entrance, Dallion looked over his shoulder. Everyone was there, in the distance, ready to charge. Falkner was standing a few steps in front of everyone else, looking intensely in Dallions direction. He was the eyes of the outfit. While Dallion was extremely impressed by the partys growth, he whispered a quick prayer for them not to mess up. From experience, hed seen that they tended not to do too well when facing something new, especially if it was something they feared.

The guardian chamber was quite different from what Dallion expected. The dome was smooth and perfectly shaped, like the inside of an eggshell. This was no mere coincidence someone had gone through great pains to sculpt it in such a fashion. Large life-size statues of quartz stood motionless near the walls, arranged like chess pieces on a board. Any of them could be the copyette. A few seconds later, Dallion saw they weren't there was a large throne of white quartz in the middle of the chamber, a throne on which another Dallion was sitting.

Hey, the copy Dallion said.

Hey, Dallion responded. Not the best first greeting, come to think of it. Interestingly, the creature's clothes were the opposite color of Dallion's, as if he was looking at a negative of himself to an extent.

LEVEL 3 GUARDIAN

Species: Copyette

Class: Shadow

Statistics: 100% HP

I've picked something to tell us apart for when the rest of your group charges in, the copyette said.

Dallion felt a chill down his spine. He suspected that the guardian would be intelligent, but this was more than was comfortable.

Don't worry, I won't attack until you do, the copyette smiled from the throne. After so much time, I'd love to chat. I rarely get to do that anymore.

Sure. Dallion started circling the throne. The massive piece of quartz furniture turned in turn so as to always face him. Are you really part of an ancient species?

No more ancient than the rest. But you already know that. Which is good since otherwise, we wouldn't be able to talk about it.

The phrasing sounded ominously familiar.

You have a limiting echo? Dallion probed.

Close, but no. The copyette's smile widened. Echoes aren't the only curses one could suffer. I take it you have seen a similar punishment before?

Yes, Dallion whispered. You can't tell me anything I don't already know.

Close enough. Are you here to fulfill the item's destiny?

No, I'm just here because of a guild entry test, Dallion explained. His grandfather had been punished in similar fashion, so he knew that he had to explain as much as possible if he wanted to get any answers.

Guild entry tests? The guardian laughed. That definitely explains a few things.

Have many groups got so far?

Two, but that was ages ago. Most of the newbies got wiped at level two. Personally, I wasn't going to reveal myself, but since you know about me already, I decided to have a chat. Who's ruling now?

How did you know I know what you were? Dallion avoided the question, mostly because he wasn't too sure himself. He knew that most of the known world was part of the Tamin Empire, though he had never bothered to look into who the current ruler was.

I can't tell you. The guardian sighed. So, what happens if you defeat me?

We pass the trial. Those who want can continue and clear the remaining two levels. The one that does best, gets to keep the dagger.

Interesting proposal. I'd suggest you don't. Each guardian is tougher than the last, as are the creatures. You were lucky I took care of everything that was on this level. The copyette winced. I don't like creatures scurrying about. As they say if this is to be my home, I could at least keep it clean. There was a slight pause. Besides, the dagger isn't that special, anyway.

I was told that once I fulfill its destiny, it'll acquire a new power or something. Dallion stopped. He had already gone to the other side of the chamber. Now the throne had its back to the entrance, not bad for an advantage.

I know, and I'm telling you the ability isn't that good. You have a harpsisword. What do you need a stupid dagger for? Not to mention you can never improve it further.

I have something in mind. Now it was Dallion's turn to smile. So, what happens to you when I clear the dagger? Do you die?

Aren't you used to killing? You'll have a very short career as an awakened if you aren't. There's every chance that you'll be drafted the moment war breaks out. I was. There was a sudden chill in the air. And to answer your question, I don't know. Maybe I'll wake up in another item, maybe I won't. I didn't have the skill to know any of the important answers. Suddenly, the copyette turned to the side. Your friends have started their charge. They should be here in a bit. A pity since I wanted to have a longer chat.

We can have a longer chat if you surrender, Dallion offered.

No. The copyette stood up from the throne. We can't.

COMBAT INITIATED

Falkner and Cellano came charging in, followed shortly by Bel. Dallion expected the copyette to turn around to face them. Instead, the copy of Dallion remained as it was, not even turning around to face them. With the massive throne protecting his back, there was some reasoning, though Dallion didn't expect such a course of action.

The attackers split into two groups, charging along either side of the hall. No sooner had they done so than the quartz statues came to life.

Then again, a few more words would hardly hurt, the copyette smiled.

There were no rectangles visible above the statues, but even so their fighting style was much more sophisticated than anything so far. It was as if two sets of awakened were fighting one another, each using similar tactics and approaches.

Copies of the previous group that reached this far, the fake Dallion explained. They don't have the health of your current group, but make up for it in numbers. Also, their technique is a bit better.

I take it, you don't want to talk to them.

Dallion gripped his harpsisword. Blue hues appeared all over the copyette's body; not only the humanoid copy that Dallion expected the guardian to be, the statues and even the throne had blue spots all over them as well as excitement, joy, and sadness all mixed in one. The creature was looking forward to the battle.

We fought you in the tunnels up to here, Dallion said.

Indeed, you did. As I said, I could have pretended to be some ordinary guardian. The copyette waved a hand. A colossus or something. But then I saw you and I changed my mind. I wanted to get a chance to have a chat. Thank you for which. I know you must have considered just charging in.

No worries, I was curious as well. Dallion glanced at the strings. Three tones, three strings. The last time that he had played for an extended period of time, there had been painful repercussions. As things stood, he didn't have much of a choice. Even with Falkner defeating one statue, two more had gone his way. Cellano was having serious problems with his, as was Bel. As for Arthurows, he still hadn't entered the chamber.

I have to admit, the last member of your group is quite clever. He knows that he'll be at a disadvantage here, so he's chosen to stay behind and kill whatever emerges from the chamber. Friend or foe.

Dallion didn't agree with the statement. He knew Arthurows was more likely staying behind to avoid any actual fighting. Thankfully, that had turned out to be a good idea for once.

Won't you send the throne at me? Dallion asked.

I could, but it would be such a waste. You allowed me to chat a bit, although you didn't have to. In thanks I'll face you in your own fashion. The guardian reached for the throne. His hand sunk in the solid quartz surface, then emerged again, this time holding a harpsisword.

Harp versus harp, the copyette said. You have the first move.

Chapter 105: Music Duel

Music skills versus music skills Knowing what the skills could do, Dallion's immediate reaction was to calm his thoughts. Moments later, he saw how pointless the attempt was. Music skills didn't grant telepathy, they merely allowed a person to see the emotions of others and manipulate them. Yet in that case, what was the way of countering them? Guard skills protected against attack skills, so if the copyette decided to attack there was nothing he could do. However, that also meant that if Dallion was first to act, then his enemy would be helpless as well.

Not great. The copyette shrugged. Not terrible. The weapons too good for you, but maybe you'll get the hang of it in a few decades.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion tried again. The result was identical moments after he played the strings, so did the guardian, stopping everything once more.

More? the guardian asked.

Apparently, there was a way to counter music, and it was remarkably simple, just like they said in physics class: every frequency had a counter-frequency that negated it. Since sound was the driving element here, negating the sound stopped the spell. Dallion was glad that finally something from school had real life practical applications. A pity he hadn't used more of his Earth knowledge up to now.

Level five? the copyette asked.

Eight, Dallion corrected.

Not bad. Single digit, though. Things really change further on.

The guardian pulled three strings of his own. Dallion felt goosebumps. A little longer and the copyette would have full control. Almost on instinct Dallion played a chord as well. He had no idea what it was, but after doing so the tingling sensation all over his skin disappeared.

The other him arched a brow. Not even Dallion expected he'd pull this off. Back on Earth he had a terrible music sense. Could it be that his perception and music skills had given him abilities he didn't know he had? More likely, he was just lucky.

The rest of the party seemed to be doing quite well, too. Falkner had already defeated three statues and had moved onto the next on his way towards the throne in the center of the chamber. Bel and Cellano had combined forces, crushing their opponents with combo-attacks, and Arthurows. Arthurows was doing a splendid job protecting Vend in the tunnel, a considerable distance from all the fighting.

It seemed that despite Dallion's theory of the levels focus, this all ended up being a battle of attrition. The side that managed to withstand the attacks longer was going to win. The way things were going there was little doubt that Dallion's party would end up being victorious, the only question was would all of them survive until the end of the trial.

It's been ages since I had a battle like this, the copyette laughed, playing another chord. I've missed it.

Dallion countered with his own chord, they playing a string combination of his own.

I've also missed having an actual conversation, the guardian continued. Being a guardian has its upsides, but the thing I still can't get used to is the silence. I even made a copy of people I used to know to have a chat, but that quickly gets bored. You can only surprise yourself that many times.

Glad to oblige, Dallion grunted. The pain in his temples had started to rear its ugly head again.

Don't talk on my behalf. The copyette paused for a few seconds. You still have to try and defeat me. I'm rooting for you, you know. If I had the option, I'd even let all of you pass. However, rules are rules. He jumped to the side, just in time to avoid two knives that Bel had thrown his way. Given your skills, I've no doubt I'll see you all again. Well, I hope it's you and not another bunch. Although who knows? Maybe they'll be fun as well.

A dozen steps away, Falkner sliced one of the surrounding quartz statues in two and rushed towards the copyette. There was no one blocking him. All the boy needed to do was land one good hit, and Dallion could take over. Unfortunately for both, the guardian had a counter for that as well. As Falkner thrust his weapon forward, planning to pierce the guardian through the back, the throne came to life.

With lightning reflexes, it transformed into a crude quartz golem, then grabbed the blade of the boy with its hand.

Falkner didn't falter. Releasing the sword, he twisted his body, then reached into the air. The sword that the quartz creature's hand disappeared, only to reappear in Falkner's hand. Red markers covered the creature's head. This was the point that a multi attack was supposed to follow but Dallion didn't even see it. In a blink of the eye, the quartz entity just crumbled to dust, disappearing altogether.

That's definitely unexpected, the copyette said without even turning around. Must be a family technique. You have some interesting friends, Dal.

I just met him a few hours ago! Dallion snapped. However, even he had to admit that he was curious about the technique. As far as he knew, Falkner's attack skills were at level ten, which meant he was no better than Dallion.

Falkner! Dallion played another chord. Let's go at him together!

The boy needed no telling twice. Dallion had hardly finished his sentence when Falkner swung his sword at the copyette.

Everyone, finish the statues and join in! Dallion shouted, playing another chord. His head was pulsing with pain, but he gritted his teeth. No matter what, he had to keep himself from fainting until the guardian was defeated. Glancing around, Dallion could see it wasn't that big of a deal less than a dozen statues remained, all focused on Bel and Cellano.

Of all the guardians Dallion had faced, this was without a doubt the most difficult by far. Possibly because it was more than a guardian. At one point the copyette had roamed the real world, gaining decades of experience. Fighting it was like fighting a real person. If only Arthurows had joined in, or Dallion could use the harpsisword to attack and play, then the guardian would be at a disadvantage.

Falkner, keep on attacking from close range! Dallion shouted and plunged forward, gripping the harpsisword. In his present state, playing while fighting was out of the question, but he didnt need to let go of the weapon in order to play and defend. After all, he had both a buckler and a set of thread armor to use in that.

Green markers appeared. Dallion could see how to protect Falkner, just as he could see how to evade the enemys attacks. Dallion chose the latter.

Nice trick. The copyette smiled. For some reason, he seemed to be having a much better time than was expected. Thinking about it, all the guardians in the dagger had. Since you know how to use two skills at once, maybe I should up my game? The guardian parried one of Falkners attacks, then immediately counterattacked all the time, still negating Dallions chords.

Meanwhile, two more statues had been destroyed. Bel and Cellano were almost at number parity, and things were getting easier for them.

Guys, hurry up! Dallion shouted.

Whats the rush? the guardian asked. Think of this as a training exercise. You need all the training you could get. Back at the time a single person could awaken such a dagger on their own.

That was undoubtedly true, but things were about to change. As painful as the headaches were, Dallion had another reason to yell out.

The copyettes attacks intensified, but so did Falkners. This was precisely what Dallion was hoping for. Taking advantage, he proceeded to complete a full defense sequence, then a second, and a third. Time slowed. In the past Dallion would use this chance to attack, but now he could do something betterperform a music attack. With speeds like that, even an experienced guardian wouldnt be able to counter. All he had to do was not mess up.

Nice and easy

, Dallion exhaled and played the first cord. Markers appeared on the harpsiswords strings. This time, nothing interrupted them before they reached the end. Nailing the moment, Dallion pulled the strings again. The copyette froze completely. Now was the moment for him to

FATAL STRIKE

Damage dealt increased by 500%

Falkner had been faster, striking the guardian the moment he the music bonus had taken effect. That, in itself, wasn't the main cause for alarm. While disappointing, Dallon was no stranger to kill steals in all the online games he'd been playing. However, seeing a strike capable of dealing five times the normal damage was more than impressive. That was quite a skill, though why hadn't the boy used it earlier, in that case?

DAGGER Level 3 has been cleared!

Claim your focus that suits you best and continue to fulfil the DAGGERs destiny!

The familiar blue rectangle emerged near the chamber gate, indicating the end of the level. It was sudden, it was unexpected, and it was a relief. With this, the trial might as well end. The party had completed what they had set out to do and now it was a matter of their guild seniors to decide which of them to take as trainees of sorts. However, no joy was visible on anyone's face. Instead, there was anticipation and uncertainty.

Around him, the entire chamber had been rendered bare. The statues had disappeared, along with the throne and the guardian.

Congratulations. Vend walked in from the tunnel, followed by Arthurows. You're the first group to pass the trial. That increases your odds in the selection process. If things hold up, you might even have people fight to get you on their teams.

There were a few murmurs as everyone, one by one, went to increase their stats. Dallon picked the mystery attribute again. Once everyone was done, the rectangle disappeared, along with the gate to the next level.

I want to leave, Cellano said. You said we can quit once we complete this level.

Yes. Vend nodded. Seconds later, the large party member disappeared. You're free to go. Anyone else want to stop here? Vend looked at the rest.

No one said a word. Despite his headache, Dallon still wanted to clear all the levels, if nothing else, just to see what would happen. Everyone else seemed to be following what he was doing.

A word of warning. From here on you'll be entering unfamiliar territory. No one knows what creatures you'll face or what the guardians will be. Also, you can say goodbye to the magic lighting. Until a level is cleared, it remains pitch black. You'll get one lantern if you want to continue and you'll have to keep it whole. Breaking it, almost guarantees failure.

Failure? Bel crossed her arms. Didn't you just say we completed the trial?

You have, as long as you don't continue to the next level. Once you set foot there, you'll need to clear it in order to complete the trial again. Vend smiled. Think of it as a way to test your faith in your abilities. At the end of the day, every decision comes with its own risks and rewards. All you can do is make the choice.

Chapter 106: Into Darkness

Well, Im out, Bel said, walking away from the rest of the group. Sorry, but its not worth it. Group trials are tough enough. It was fun, but from here on, youre on your own.

The girl disappeared moments later, leaving only Arthurows, Falkner, and Dallion behind.

The odds didnt seem good. While Dallion knew he could rely on Falknerwho had also proven to be the strongest in the grouphe had serious misgivings about Arthurows. To put it mildly, Arthurows was a slacker. Little wonder he had failed five times in a row. Personally, Dallion was amazed that he hadnt left already.

Falkner? Dallion asked.

The boy hesitated. For several seconds he stood there, motionless, then slowly shook his head.

Sorry, he whispered. Im not allowed to do this. Ill have to end here as well. Soon he was gone.

Dallion clenched his fists. He very much wanted to get the dagger. Not so much because of its awakened formthere was a different reason entirely.

That settles it, Arthurows said with a smile to no ones surprise. Thanks for the ride, Dal. Good luck with whatever you decide. The blink of the eye later and Dallion was alone with the echo.

Three levels a group of five people equipped with better weapons than Dallion had thought possible, while in his village, and they had only managed to clear three levels. And those were the easy levels. The remaining two would be far more difficult and completely unknown.

Is the headache gone? Vend asked, ending Dallions chain of thought.

Err. Dallion snapped back to reality. Err, yes, much better, he lied. The pain was still there, wrapped like a band round his head. So, this is it? he asked. Theres no way I could guard you and fight on.

Are you sure you want to? You saw what it was like fighting a copyette. The next two guardians are stronger. Without anyone guarding you, do you think you have a chance? Even with your music skills?

Maybe. As long as the guardians dont counter me, why not?

You cant rely on something not happening. For all you know maybe every guardian from here on has the ability to counter music attacks. Youve already passed the trial, and on your first time. You should be proud.

The pride of mediocrity is nothing but a loss. Dallion managed to muster a smile. That was something his father used to say back on Earth. There were times in which Dallion hated the phrase, but he had to admit his old man was right. Quitting how would be regarded as half a victory at best. If I fail, can I reserve the dagger for next time?

Huh? Vend tilted his head.

If I continue and dont make it to the end of level four, Ill fail the trial, right?

Those are the rules.

After that, can you put the dagger away? I want to have another go at it next time.

There was a long moment of silence, after which the echo erupted in laughter. For half a minute he continued. Unable to stop. Meanwhile, Dallions mood shifted from surprise to annoyance, to outright embarrassment.

I see why March liked you, Vend managed to say once he caught his breath. You want to try and continue on your own, despite everything Ive said, knowing youll fail and you want me to keep the dagger from other pickers in the meantime?

Said out loud the argument didnt make much sense. Dallion, however, was already one step ahead.

Even if the level doesnt get cleared, Ill at least know what to expect. Besides, who knows? Maybe Ill manage to pull this off somehow? The harpsisword had turned out to be an even more devastating weapon than the dartbow, and he had both. As long as he could withstand the headaches, there was a chance that he could make it to the next guardian, and who knows? Maybe luck would be on his side and hell manage to get further still?

Alright, the echo nodded. When you finish the trial, just tell Estezol to check the echo and hell take care of it. Meanwhile, Ill remain here. If you go on, youll go on your own with a lantern. That means if you fail you fail on your ownno excuses about an echo dragging you down.

That sounds fair. Other than failing this months selection, will there be any other consequences?

Other than your judgement being under question? No, no other consequences. Youll still get guild jobs, and youll be allowed to take the trial again next time.

Thinking back, the previous three levels were linked to reaction, perception, and mind. If his theory was correct, the next one would be linked to body which would make things slightly on the difficult side. Then again, it also meant the creatures would be more vulnerable to music attacks.

Last chance, Vend said, placing a large yellow lantern on the floor. Are you sure you dont want to take the victory?

Half a victory is not a victory, Dallion smiled and grabbed the lantern. Moments later, he was down the spiral ramp to the fourth level.

A few steps in, darkness engulfed him. The difference between levels quickly became apparent. All the light that Dallion had taken for granted so far was completely gone. Even the lantern barely gave him a sphere of visibility six feet wide. As things stood, it was more likely to help the monsters find him faster than the opposite.

The fourth level chamber was almost entirely made of amber jade. If Dallion had to guess, the levels represented the path from the tip of the dagger towards the hilt, where the gem was. No doubt the final level would have halls and tunnels made entirely of flawless red jade. The light of the lanterns bounced off the smooth floor and walls surfaces, letting Dallion see just enough of the overall shape. No doubt that was the first challengeif he continued with the lantern, the light would travel forward, making the entire level aware of his presence faster than with fiber optics.

No wonder the first group stopped here. Although, it was possible that they just didnt see it being worth the bother. If the copyette was to be believed, the dagger wasnt worth much. It was entirely possible he had told the previous parties the same as well.

After another few minutes of thought, Dallion left the lantern on the floor near the entrance. Light wasnt the only way he could see in darkness. As the harpsisword had shown, Dallions music skills were capable of showing him anything that had emotions, and thats what he focused on.

Five steps in the tunnel beyond the chamber, a wave of dread passed through him. Even with awakened skills, walking through such darkness made him feel as if he was lost in the abyss. Only the sound of his steps and the sensation of his clothes kept him from losing it altogether.

In the darkness, time flowed differently. Seconds stretched to minutes, even more. By the time the light from the entry chamber was gone, Dallion felt as if hed been walking for hours. This wasnt only because he was careful not to crash into any invisible columns of other obstacles. His mind was definitely starting to play tricks on him. And precisely at that moment, when Dallion wasnt even fully certain where he was, he heard a faint noise coming from further ahead.

It was a growl; not the small dog type of growl that poodles made when their favorite toy was under threat of being taken away No, this sounded more like a massive tiger, displaying a sign of annoyance at something entering its domain.

At first nothing happens, then slowly the faint blue outline of a blob appeared in the distance. It was barely larger than a grain of rice, filled with a bouquet of emotions that displayed annoyance and hostility.

Dallion swallowed. Not only was the creature in a foul mood, but it also required a four-string chord to influence. And that wasnt all. If there was one creature, it was guaranteed that more were nearby. Still, this was a good chance. Given that Dallion could see the target, he could also influence it or at least try to.

As the strings vibrated, four blue markers emerged, moving towards the tip of the harpsisword in unison. This was a very welcome surprise for Dallion, who got the timing right without issue. The experience hed received during this trial, not to mention the levels of music improvement, was already a huge bonus even if he ended up failing the selection trial.

The third time he played the chord, Dallion started noticing certain changes in the target. While the creature remained in its original place, one of its emotions had vanished, requiring only three strings to be played.

Nice, Dallion thought, slowly stepping forward. Maybe he had a chance at this after all.

Step by step, he moved closer, until his music skills allowed him to see the entire creature.

Species: Jackalope

Class: Earth

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills: Antler rush

Weak spots: none

This wasn't the first time Dallion had heard of the mythological creature. Back on Earth, he had even composed memes with it. Seeing it in person was outright terrifying. If the creature was supposed to be half rabbit, half antelope, this world definitely hadn't received the memo. The size of a bear, the creature indeed had a lot of rabbit features ears and nose mostly although it was also equipped with hooves and the largest set of antlers Dallion thought possible. The thing alone could slice him up, acting simultaneously as a shield and a collection of swords.

Upon playing a fifth cord, the unexpected happened. Without warning, the giant jackalope collapsed to the ground. The silhouette remained visible, as did the blue hues within the creature itself. The vibrations, though, had stopped.

Got you! Dallion swung the harpsisword at the creature. He could feel it slice through bone before stopping in the tunnel floor. Moments later, the white rectangle disappeared.

It had worked! Despite the splitting headache, Dallion had managed to kill his first level four creature, and had done so on his own. All he needed now was a bit of rest and

FATAL WOUND

Your health was reduced by 75%

There was a sharp shot of pain. Dallion knew that he was done for. With all the health he had lost in the levels before, a seventy-five percent reduction was enough to deplete what was left, or at the very least leave him on a sliver.

How? Dallion turned to the side. There was only darkness there, yet in the darkness a white rectangle appeared. Then another, and another, and another. A whole wave of jackalope rectangles emerged. Dallion was certain he hadn't felt their presence a moment ago, so how

An antler sliced through him, causing everything to disappear.

Crap! Dallion jumped back, only to slam into the wall of the very small testing room.

The rest of the party looked in his direction. From everyone's perspective, only a moment had passed since the start of the trial. In the real world, everything had ended the moment they had touched the dagger. Unlike the others, though, Dallion was the only one who had failed the selection trial.

Chapter 107: Second Chances

I'm really sorry, Dal, Falkner said. The boy was struggling to keep his tears to the point that one would think it was him that had failed and not Dallion. It's not that I didn't want to help.

Hey, its okay. Dallion smiled, patting the boy on the shoulder. Its all on me. I shouldnt have pushed it. Besides, its not like anyone forced me, right? I could have stopped at any time.

In the back of his mind, however, Dallion was starting to wonder why he didnt. Actually, that wasnt entirely true. He knew why he hadnt. It wasnt about claiming the daggerhe could have made the request that it be saved for him even after he completed the trial. The truth was that he wanted to prove he was better than the rest, both to himself and to everyone else. If he was the one who had cleared even one level on his own, people would have treated him differently. No longer would they refer to him as Marchs selected, but as the one who had soloed an entire level. Instead, now they were likely going to refer to him as the guy who had passed the trial and thrown it away for no good reason.

Life is nothing but a series of lessons, Arthurows said. Just keep looking on the bright side. Look at meI had to go through five tries before I finally made it. And its not like you lost a lot. Youre still in the guild, you still get to go on jobs. Pretty much, nothing has changed.

The selection process continued. All that had passed were called back somewhere, to have their mentors be known, while the rest were given a free lunch, to restore their strength. Initially, Dallion was about to refuse and just return to Hannahs inn, but Estezol convinced him to stay a bit longer.

The garden was packed with people, all of them eating. A large numberthe first timershad chewed their food with glum expressions. Even so, one of their groups would say or do something to cheer them up. Unlike them, Dallion remained alone, leaning on the building while holding a plate of grilled sausages.

That wasnt a smart move, a voice said next to him. Turning in that direction, Dallion saw Vend. His clothes were different from the echo inside, but there was no mistaking him. You were discussed a lot, just to let you know. No doubt about it, you showed a lot of adaptability for a natural this young.

Im guessing that didnt change the outcome? Dallion asked, hoping for the contrary.

No, Vend shook his head. A lot of things could be forgiven, but not going against the selection rules. With the number of people whove failed its very likely that the next test would be easier. Its not a good image for the guild if there are too many packrats.

Too many packrats. It was almost funny how even in this world, guilds worried about what was good optics. The fact that Vend had shared it at all suggested that he didnt agree.

Youll only be offered basic tasks until you pass your selection, Vend went on. That also means that youll have to come here to get your training. Estezol can explain all that, but theres something else I wanted to talk to you about.

Vend took out a dagger from his belt and offered it to Dallion. The intention was obvioushe wanted to have a conversation in private. If that was the case, Dallion saw no reason not to accept.

He put his finger on the tip of the dagger.

Item Awakening

The dagger room was spacious and high, very much like the attic of a tower. Everything around was made of dark grey metal.

The DAGGER is Level 15

Not bad for a level. Dallion could assume that from here on most of the gear hed see would be in the double digits.

You are in a small metal hall.

Defeat the guardian to change the DAGGERS destiny!

Dark iron, Vend said, seeing how Dallion was looking around. Ive got a lot of gear thats much better, but I keep it for sentimental reasons. Its also a reminder of where I started.

What youve done youve done. I didnt want to talk to you about that. If you had passed, wed be having this conversation in another room of the guildhall, but the talk would be the same. He paused for a moment. A metal chair emerged from the ground, letting Vend sit in it. The entire citys been buzzing how March conducted your entry trial. The way rumors spread many secretly think youve been chosen for her next apprentice. As youve seen, that has made people react differently. Some want to get close to you to take advantage, others are envious of the attention youve got and will try to bring you down. And then there are all those wholl want to crush you just to measure their strength.

Dallion swallowed. He hadnt imagined things to get so serious, so fast.

In a way, your silly mistake back has made things a bit better. Failing to pass your selection will get a lot to convince themselves that you arent anything special. Its up to you to prove them right or wrong.

Dallion blinked. This he didnt expect.

Before the trial, March asked me to consider taking you as my apprentice. I agreed to observe your performance, but never had any intention of becoming your mentor.

Sort of, Vend smirked. You showed some serious leadership skills down there. Better than a lot of the older members, to be sure. I would have said youve had experience in that, but I know that isnt possible.

In a way Vend was correct, but he was also very wrong. Dallion indeed had received quite a lot of experience, at least as much as any person back on Earth with a healthy MMO experience would have. The hours spent grinding in a group and watching strategy videos had paid off big time in the most unexpected way.

Thats not the reason Ive decided to give you a chance. The man paused. In the dagger, you told my echo that you wanted to fulfill the daggers destiny, that half a victory is no victory. That showed me you are really bad at determining your strength. However, theres a possibility you have the will to

finish what youve started. Since only my echo was there, I cant be certain, so heres my offer. In one month, Ill conduct the test again. Only this time, Ill personally be observing. There will be no echo you must protect, no party members to help you out. Youll fight your way through the levels of the same dagger alone and without help until you fulfill its destiny. Show me you can do that and Ill make you my first apprentice.

Dallion was at a loss for words. For one thing, he couldnt tell whether that was a good thing or a bad thing. Usually there were only two reasons someone would have no apprentices either they were that good that no one could keep up, or they were so terrible that no one wanted to. Given that Vend was an Icepicker guild elite, the former was more likely.

Think you can manage that?

One month. Dallion repeated. That meant little when it came to true time.

I know it sounds like a lot, but it isnt. Youll need to bump up your skills a lot, and Im not only talking about your personal ones. To have a chance youll need to enter the double digits and be able to use your gear adequately, not at ten percent as you did today.

No worries. You can count on me! Dallion grinned, feeling his confidence grow.

Well see.

The awakened reality collapsed, returning both to the real world. Without saying a word, Vend put his dagger away and left. After finishing his food, Dallion did the same. There were no two minds about it, luck had been on his side once again. The important thing now was not to slack off during that time, and that included reading.

Well, the echo of Adzorg greeted him. Cant say Im surprised. I had hoped you wouldnt do something that foolish, though.

Dallion remained silent for a few moments. Even now he still couldnt get used to the idea that the echo knew more about what was going on in the real world than him.

Still, you did manage to display some adequate skills, Nil went on. And youve finally started using your music skills adequately. All in all, Id say not bad.

Was that a compliment? Dallion smirked.

It was. The echo frowned. It isnt anymore. So, what would you like to check on today? Sphere items, I assume? Or maybe a full and detailed history of the copyette race and their falls in pictures, if possible?

I want to learn more of the Seven Moons. To the echos surprise, Dallion went to the single table in the library and took the scroll. After that I want you to tell me about attack and defense skills starting from the basics.

Are you certain that youre feeling alright? Nil asked, with genuine concern. Thats a very mature request that requires a lot of focus and huge amounts of reading before you start practicing.

I have to start somewhere. Dallion looked around. Also, a chair and a desk would be nice.

In the blink of the eye, they were there, built exactly to Dallions needs.

Thanks. He sat down and started reading.

The process of reading was just as boring as Dallion imagined it. The author of the scroll seemed to love using long metaphors between every two facts, making the information more difficult to obtain. Dallion felt like a gold miner sifting through mud so as to get a grain of precious metal. After an hour, though, his attitude changed when he came to a simple realizationthe authors of this world werent as obsessed with time as people back on Earth. Not pressured by time, the awakened could enjoy reading more than bullet points on a power point presentation. Here, instruction manuals were made so that the readers might enjoy the language as well. Dallion wasnt used to his instruction manuals being written in the fashion of a Shakespearean epic, but given how much time he had, he was willing to learn.

As he remembered from before, there were Seven Moons that granted the awakened powers to humanity. Each moon was said to be a deity and patron of a race. What was more a moon was also associated with an awakened attribute as well.

The first moonthe blue moon Astrezawas the moon of humans and awakening. Considered the strongest and most important moons, it dominated over all others. Interestingly enough, there was nothing explaining why the human race had become so abundant. In several instances it was explicitly stated that all species were equal in number and spread throughout the realms to do as they wished.

The second moon was called Berennah. Cyan in color, it was the moon of mind and copyettes, a race considered smartest of all. While not explicitly mentioned, Dallion knew what had befallen that race.

Next was the red moon Centor, moon of dwarves and the strength they possessed. Apparently, it was also considered the patron of craftsmen, soldiers, and athletes. Revered as the second most important of the moons, it continued to play an important part of society, especially among the non-awakened.

Fourth was Dararr, the yellow moon of lightning. Moon of the furies, such as Jiroh, it was linked to reflexes, although little else was mentioned. Apparently, there had been a schism ages ago that had caused it to be temporarily excluded from the main pantheon, before being returned a few centuries later. The exact cause of both these events was not specified.

Finally, there was Emion, the white moon of gorgons. From what Nil had explained, it was the reason the snake-headed species were granted with such good perception. Ominously enough, the moon was also referred to in the scroll, as the moon of assassins. Given the weapons and abilities the awakened had, Dallion could imagine it being of vital importance for snipers.

Nil, Dallion looked up from the scroll. How come there are only five moons described? Im sure that I read about two more last time. Not to mention that that title of the scroll had the words seven moons prominently mentioned.

Oh, theyre there. You just cant see them.

What does that mean?

You mentioned a cleric called Cleric a while back? The reason he has no name was that his name was removed from all realms in the empire. Think of it as an echo that isnt an echo. Even the awakened are bound by the rules of a realm. If a powerful enough prayer is used, the rules could be made to influence our perception.

Youre telling me that someone erased the names of the moons from us? Dallion gasped.

Of course not. The echo shook his head. What Im saying is that a rule has been set, and that we are the ones that have been punished to abide by it. The reason you cannot see the names of the final moons is because they dont want you to.

Chapter 108: Back to Basics

A world in which things could make themselves be forgotten out of existence. It was as fascinating as it was terrifying. Through the scrolls he read, Dallion became fully aware of the real difference between nobility and the normal awakened. Based on Earths history, he had assumed nobility to be a status granting them power. In effect it was very much the opposite the title was a representation of the persons power. Being a count pretty much guaranteed the person was the strongest in the county and, more importantly, controlled the entire area.

The entire reason Aspion had become chief of Dallions village was because he was the strongest awakened there after Dallions grandfather a fact that would have been nice to know before Dallion actually challenged him. Looking back, Dallion had been extremely lucky since he had gotten the village chief angry, to the point of making a mistake. Under normal circumstances the fight would have been a foregone conclusion and Dallions awakened powers would have been sealed.

Nerosal, as Dallion had learned from the library echo, was controlled by Countess Priscord herself, despite not being the province capital. That meant that most of the day-to-day activities had been delegated to the Citys Lord Baron Melias the Third. It could be assumed that he was the one who determined the rules of the city area, although couldnt go overboard less it be seen as a challenge to the countess.

What about houses? Dallion asked. Can their owners affect everything inside?

The echo looked at Dallion, his expression overflowing with disappointment, then just sighed.

Yes, thats where the phrase king of my castle comes from. That is your area and as long as you dont create too much chaos, youll be allowed to do whatever you want. However the echo went up to Dallion and tidies the books on the desk its a bit early to think about area effects. As tempting as it is, its never a good idea to start running before you can walk. Youve been extremely lucky so far, but luck never lasts. The trick is to obtain enough experience before your luck runs out.

Yeah, yeah. Dallion nodded. So what do you recommend I read now? I finished the Treatment of the Seven Moons as much as I could read of it, anyway. It would have been more correct to name the scroll the Treatment of the Five Moons and a mention of two more.

You did ask to learn the basics of attack, guard, and music skills. The echo looked at the many tomes gathered on the desk. Or did you change your mind again?

Thats true, but I wanted to know your thoughts. What do you think I should continue with? Gaps in knowledge, remember?

Oh, err The echo paused, almost uncertain of the request. Dallion was getting the feeling that, despite his previous experience, echoes were more like assistants. This one, despite having the knowledge of a guild captain, acted very much like an English butler. Im glad that you would ask. To be honest, your choices arent all bad. The best way to learn to use your skills is to read up on them, however, there is one step that awakened consistently skip, to their downfall, in my opinion.

Please, tell me. Dallion smiled.

Part of him hoped that the echo would reveal some ancient forgotten secret that would give him a vast advantage. Instead, Nil went off to a section of the library, then returned with another scroll, this one much thinner than the first. Looking at the ribbon wrapping the scroll, Dallion could read House of the Twelve Suns.

Whats this? Dallion asked. It sounded somewhat similar to the name of the first scroll.

As youve already seen, the Seven Moons influence every aspect of life and society in this world and all awakened realms. However, theres another factor of vital importance. The twelve suns, as they were sometimes referred to, arent deities, nor do they have such an impact as the moons, yet for the awakened they are no less vital.

Dallion kept nodding, waiting for the echo to get to the good part. In terms of presentation, the old man definitely had him hooked. At the same time, the echo kept looking expectantly at Dallion.

Can you venture a guess? Nil asked at last.

Err zodiac signs? Dallion suggested. After all, suns were stars and stars formed zodiac signs, and at least on Earth there were twelve zodiac signs.

The echo didnt say a word. For several seconds he stood there speechless, then crossed his arms.

You surprise me, Dal. All this time, I thought you were a muscle head and then you suddenly surprise me with such insight. Yes, you are correct, the twelve suns are also represented by the constellations, although they were originally called suns. Some philosophers and theologists even speculate that all stars we see today originated from these twelve suns. However, thats a discussion for another time. The echo waved his hand. Whats relevant for you is that the twelve suns represent the twelve skill groups an awakened could have.

Only twelve skills? he asked, somewhat disappointed.

Twelve skill groups, the echo corrected. There are only twenty-seven letters in the alphabet. Is that any indication how many words exist?

I guess not

Still, twelve skills sounded ridiculously low. That means that Dallion had already learned a quarter of all known skills. Well, granted that his mastery of music wasn't particularly good, and he had only learned how to use two weapons and a half.

Take your harpsisword, for example, Nil went on. Have you mastered it? You have capped your attack skills, haven't you? In that case, why can't you take full advantage of it in battle? Same goes for your dartbow.

So you're saying each skill has hundreds of subskills?

The echo rolled his eyes.

And just when I was thinking you were showing progress he sighed. No, the skills are what grants you the ability to learn faster. That's why they are called sunlike the moons, only less impactful. You don't have to be an awakened to learn how to use a sword. The difference is that it will take you decades to achieve what an awakened can in days, and I'm not talking about real world time. The markers, the flexibility granted to your body, all that comes from the skills.

Interesting premise. Dallion had never thought about it. Good thing he had asked the echo for his advice. As game skill trees had taught Dallion, it was always better to have the full picture before spending skills points. From what he had seen so far, acquiring skills in this world as an extremely difficult process, it would be wise to know what to take once he got the opportunity. Before he could open the scroll, Dallion's stomach gurgled.

Immediately Dallion straightened up. Despite being alone with an echo, this felt as embarrassing as farting in public.

Another piece of advice, you're free to ignore, is not to spend all your time here. While real time is frozen, your hunger isn't. Often the body can't tell the difference.

Yeah, I know what you mean. As tempted as Dallion was to crack the scroll open, that could wait a bit. I'll be back later.

Very well. And one last piece of advice, before you go. Don't spend all your time locked up here. Its friends and acquaintances that drive us to greatness. Neglect them too much and they'll let you down when you need them the most.

I'll keep it in mind. Dallion left the library ring.

Next thing he knew, he was back in his room at the inn. He felt quite exhausted. The hours spent in the trial and the ones in the library had drained him so much that he could barely keep his eyes open.

With a yawn, Dallion dragged himself a few steps forward, then collapsed on the bed.

You're finally awake, she said, letting go of his shoulders.

What happened? Dallion jumped up.

Lunch started ten minutes ago. That happened! the woman snapped at him. Around here punctuality is a must, not a nice to have. Hannah gave him a critical look. And you slept in your clothes, too. Better mend them into shape.

Huh?

The wrinkles. You're not serving customers looking like that! Go ahead, fix them.

That was among the most unusual requests Dallion had heard, but seeing the vein bulging on the side of Hannah's forehead, he decided it wasn't a good idea to argue. He stood up, then one by one awakened and straightened all his clothes.

That turned out to be surprisingly efficient. If he had that back home, he wouldn't have had to learn to iron—he could have just used the clothes labyrinths to remove all wrinkles. A pity the same didn't work on washing.

Better, Hannah said once he had finished. Now, I'm aware this was a traumatic day for you, but that can't be an excuse to not do your job.

Traumatic? Word of his failure had definitely spread fast. With so many eyes on him, it could be no different. Hopefully, Vend was right and this would allow him to step out of the limelight somewhat.

It won't happen again, Dallion said in his practiced Earth-acquired routine. I'll be more responsible from now on.

Back on Earth, his mother would laugh at such a claim. Hannah, though, looked at him with a serious expression and nodded. Were people in this world so trusting? From what he had seen, it was entirely possible. After all, awakened had little use of lying—they had a variety of means to achieve the outcome they wanted without resorting to lies.

Well, come along, then. Hannah urged. There's a crowd waiting downstairs. Also, Aspan has some food for you. Mend a few things, then dig in. I've already told him to have seconds ready.

It turned out that Hannah wasn't exaggerating. The place was practically packed. A lot of the faces Dallion recognized from a few days ago. Quite a few were new and, thankfully, there weren't any awakened he could spot.

Flashing his best smile, Dallion started going about. The mending instances had drastically gone down since yesterday, while the improvement requests had increased. Hannah quickly made it known that he would only be doing three at most—which was a lot, considering six improvements had been his daily limit until this morning. Still, it was good practice, and good money, so he got to it.

First, he started with the mending. With two exceptions, most requests were of items the patrons had brought with them. From what he managed to learn from Hannah, having a registered awakened on staff allowed the inn to perform minor external mending and improvements as long as they didn't go over certain limits.

Nearly always, the issue was a minor crack or scar of a valued item—things too insignificant to go to a mending store and impossible to fix otherwise. After mending two pen knives, one chipped vase,

and two torn books, Dallion took a pause to have some food. Aspan, the inns resident cook, had outdone himself as always. The dish tasted more than wonderful and was enough to fill Dallion up in a few minutes. Unfortunately, Jirohs absence also meant that once he had finished eating he had to help out with serving food as well.

A few hours later, lunch was over. The majority of the crowd had gone off, leaving only a few regulars behind, and Dallion could enjoy his second meal, this time accompanied by Hannah. All in all, he had mended over thirty items and improved three, thus maxing out his music skills.

By the way, Dallion said between bites. Am I the only one staying here? So far I havent seen any other guests.

Its not the season. And since Im not near the main gates, I have to make a living by selling food.

That was a somewhat questionable business plan, but Dallion wasnt a business guru, either. What he could see was that he had increased the money flow quite a lot since coming here. No wonder Hannah had hired him so readily once he had passed her test.

Jiroh lives here as well, just not in the guest area, the woman said after a while.

Same arrangement as me?

Something like that. Hannah allowed herself a faint smile. The first decent employee I got.

And not me? Dallion laughed. Originally, he meant it as a joke, but judging by Hannahs sobering expression, she had taken it seriously.

Youre an awakened. People like you come and go without warning. Ive had temps who are now knights. Thats the nature of things. You come here when you need a place to stay, then when you get what life offers, you move on leaving the inn behind. The same will happen to you.

Thats a dark way to look at things.

It always happens. Sooner or later, youll have the power of the universe within grasp. Do you think a simple tavern will be able to hold you then?

Dallion didnt answer.

Chapter 109: Twelve Suns

The next few days were a combination of learning, working, and eating, with moments of sleeping in between. Despite the echos insistence, Dallion didnt set foot outside the inn, choosing to read and train in the library until hungry and exhausted, then sleep until his work shift. In many regards, Dallion was like a student cramming for exams. The good news was that he had finally obtained enough information to determine his way of development.

According to the scroll Nil had given him, all skills in this world were collected in twelve groups. When learned, each group provided the instructions on how to advance the skills in the form of awakened markers, as well as specific bonuses should a sequence of markers be followed correctly. Additionally, the skills were divided into four categories in terms of statistical rarity. Guard, attack, athletics, and acrobatics were considered being the most common of all skills. Apparently, nine out of ten awakened started with one of them, and were almost certain to obtain them later in life if they didnt.

Interestingly enough, athletics included a whole range of skills Dallion would never have put in one group, despite there being a certain logic to it. In general, every sport related skill, other than acrobatics, was considered part of athletics, namely: climbing, swimming, throwing, lifting and so on. Meanwhile, jumping, balance, gymnastics, and everything flexibility related seemed to fall under acrobatics. Given an opportunity Dallion would definitely have loved to acquire either of the two skills, especially athletics maybe that way he'd finally stop being afraid of swimming.

The second category of skills were considered the crafter skills: forging, carving, art, and writing, they were guaranteed to provide a comfortable life to anyone who had them. Even outside a guild, any awakened using these skills could find employment at a noble's estate or in one of the more prosperous merchant unions. The funny thing was that none of the skill groups were very true to their skill name. Forging meant all manner of metalwork, yet at the same time included jewelry and glassworks. Carving was also linked to all sorts of woodwork, as well as sculpting. However, it was art and writing that took the cake in terms of weird logic.

Art, the skill Jiroh's gorgon friend had, included drawing, but for the most part focused on weaving, leatherwork, and everything else that had something to do with clothes. Whoever had come up with the skill's name must have hated clothes a lot since they chose the single non-tailor-like skill to give the group its name.

And finally, there was writing. Dallion had guessed correctly that the skill included arithmetic and geometry, apart from the actual writing. What he couldn't have guessed is that the skill allowed awakened to pick up and learn languages quickly. An awakened with a high level of writing could in the very real sense know all known languages and switch between them with ease. According to the scroll, the skill was also the perfect counter against music influences. While music skills attempted to sway and manipulate people based on their emotions, writing through its logic of letters and numbers counteracted that effect. That was quite good to know, especially given how much Dallion had started to rely on his music skills in battle.

The last four of the twelve skills were referred to as the rare skills. They were by far more difficult to master, but offered great power to those that did. The music skills Dallion's mother had given him were among those skills. With enough training, Dallion could become able to influence people, as well as objects, by playing any instrument, or even singing. As for the remaining three skills in this category, they remained hidden.

Dallion already knew that spellcraft was among the skills. It being strictly linked to the lost attribute of magic; it made sense why it too would be hidden from the eyes of those who didn't possess it. That still left two skills about which Dallion remained clueless. The library echo hadn't proven to be of much help either, merely explaining that they would become revealed when the time is right, if at all.

However, the most fascinating thing about the awakened skills wasn't what they individually offered. Their greatest advantage was that they could be combined to create entirely new aspects of themselves. The harpsword was a perfect such example. Created to make use of three skills, it allowed its owners to attack and defend themselves through music. At present Dallion was only able to use one aspect of the weapon at a time, but as he had seen from the copyette, it was possible to use more.

Are you sure there's no way I could learn about the missing skills? Dallion asked. I know that spellcraft exists, even if the scroll doesn't show it to me.

What you know is just a word, the echo replied. Im sure you know the names of the other two skills as well, but never thought of them as such. Until you do, they will remain a mystery. Also, sometimes its better not to meddle with things you dont know.

You were the one who gave me this to read, remember? Dallion felt slightly annoyed.

The only way you could even theoretically obtain any of the last two skills, is to have the lost attribute and since you dont, knowing about them is pointless. Nil crossed his arms. Maybe focus a bit more on what you have, instead of nitpicking all the time.

The echo had a point. In truth, it was Dallions sense of curiosity that made him want to know about them. That way at least he would know the full set and not have to guess. That aside, he had a tough choice deciding what skills to take should the opportunity arise. According to the scroll, nearly all awakened got to learn four skills during their life, often more. If Dallion was to get the option, he wasnt sure what hed choose. Both athletics and acrobatics were going to boost his attack and defense capabilities tremendously; at the same time, any of the forging skills would allow him to craft his own weapons and gear. Last, but not least, being able to understand every language was a childhood dream of Dallions even if, so far, he had only come across a single language in this world.

So, what would you suggest? Dallion asked.

You want me to tell you what skills to go after? The echo arched a brow. Even if that is determined purely based on your personal development and is a choice that would influence the direction of your destiny? He paused for several seconds to drive the point through. If that were the case, I suppose I would recommend writing.

Because it will allow me to counteract music attacks? Dallion asked, his voice full of enthusiasm.

No, because then maybe youll finally be able to understand what Im telling you! The reason you should know more about the skills isnt to know which one to choose. As an awakened any skill the Seven offer to you should be accepted and treated as a blessing. The reason to let you read the scroll, is because now you might have a better understanding of what to expect out there. This isnt your village. Here, awakened come with all sorts of powers and, unless they are complete rookies, theyll keep the information to themselves.

Whatever you say, wise old man, Dallion smirked. Any other advice youd like to dispense?

Anything else youd listen to? I told you to go out and about the city to learn whats going on and make a few friends. Instead, you keep coming back here.

I thought I had gaps in my training.

You have gaps in your life as well. No matter what level you reach, youll never be strong enough to make it alone. Take that from me.

Duly noted. Dallion stood up. I guess Ill start reading about the skills I have next.

That might be a good idea. Id also recommend learning how to use a dartbow adequately. Then again, I believe Ive already said that before.

Of course, you did, Dallion laughed. Catch you later. He returned to the real world.

With a stretch, Dallion stood up from his bed. For some reason, his body felt stiff. He had done his best to minimize the impact from skipping realms, and yet that still hadn't helped much. Apparently, there were only so many days he could remain in the library at a time.

Since he had finished work until evening he could do that as well. With the money that he had earned the last few days, he could finally buy some proper clothes, as well as pay off Eury for his shoes, and maybe something more that would catch his fancy. Hannah had warned him not to be too careless with his money, since the mending and improvement requests were bound to shrink with time. Even so, after all that work and studying, it was time to have a little fun.

Leaving the harpsisword in his room, Dallion ran down the staircase and left the inn. The streets were packed at this time of day. It was utterly amazing how so many people in the city actually held. Enjoying the hustle and bustle, Dallion made his way to the central market area of the city. On the way, he decided to pass by Taems shop to see how he was doing and probably buy a pair of daggers. As he soon found out, though, the forgers shop was no more.

And you're sure this has always been your shop? Dallion asked for the third time.

The confused proprietor could only nod.

And you don't know anything about an awakened being here?

This is just a small workshop I rent out now and again, the man said. I'd have noticed if an awakened came to stay here. If that were true, I'd be able to charge extra.

Peculiar indeed. Dallion was certain this was the place from where he had gotten the harpsisword. The appearance of the store, the size of the room, even the door itself, were all familiar. Sadly, nothing else was. The vast selection of weapons was gone, replaced by crude pots. Instead of an awakened forger, Dallion had come across a balding middle-aged merchant who insisted he had nothing to do with any awakened and most definitely wasn't selling weapons. The most alarming thing was that Dallion actually believed him. There were no obvious signs that the man was lying; he was just confused and very very afraid.

Were you open four days ago? Dallion pressed on.

Oh, definitely. I was a bit short staffed back then, so I had to hire a temp to watch over the store until I got back.

If you think somethings wrong, tell the city guard? The merchant said, still trembling. Its their job to deal with rogue awakened.

Wheres the nearest station of the guard? Dallion asked with a deep sigh.

Chapter 110: Guards and Gorgons

Nerosal had, as it turned out, thirty city guard barracks. Each was the size of a small fort, taking as much space as half a city block. The fact that Dallion had only been able to see three since he had arrived, suggested that the city was even larger than he imagined. Strictly speaking, the nearest barracks was at the city gate Dallion had entered through upon arriving. After some consideration and consulting the library echo though, he decided to go for the second closest, which was about twenty minutes away.

Dallion checked the time through his library ring. There was still over an hour until he had to get to work, though that didnt make him feel any better. Going to the city guard with his complaints could well result in him losing his harpsisword, but as Nil had pointed out, not going would be worse.

Barracks eleven was quite impressive up close, and also surprisingly quiet. The first thing that Dallion noticed was the state of the structure perfectly flawless, while still maintaining its rough serious business exterior. This was clearly the work of an awakened, likely more than one.

No one stopped Dallion as he entered the main building. If anything, a few of the guard gave him a curious glance in passing.

According to Nil, Sergeant Selion Ank was the person responsible for awakened theft. Since Dallion had no idea who or where the person was, he proceeded to the main entry hall of the building. The inside of the building was every bit clean and well kept as the outside, with one exception the room layout appeared to have been designed a few centuries ago and never touched since. Most shocking of all, the rough tone room was filled with wooden cubicles, each with a wooden stool and a bored city guard sitting on top.

You, there! a plump white-haired guard in a spotless uniform shouted.

Confused, Dallion pointed at himself.

Yes, you. Youre an awakened, right?

Err, yes. Dallion straightened up. Im registered at

Come here. The old guard waved, thoroughly disinterested in what Dallion was saying.

After a moments hesitation, Dallion did.

New here?

Err, yes, yes I am. Been here only a

Give me your hand.

Surprised by the second interruption, Dallion extended his hand. The guard quickly grabbed hold of it.

Item Awakening

The room Dallion found himself in was small but comfortable, the way an old soldier would want it to be upon retirement. Unlike the barracks hall, the chairs were large, wide, and overflowing with cushions.

Well continue here. Saves a lot of time, the guard stretched. So, what seems to be the trouble?

Err Dallion hesitated. Dont I need to prove who I am?

Emblem. The guard pointed at Dallions chest. Only now did Dallion notice that his guild emblem was hanging from his neck, not to mention it was several times larger than before. Youre from the Icepickers. A lot of guards are familiar with the bunch.

Uh, oh

. Dallion felt tense. Had the guild gotten in trouble with the local law? Seeing his expression, the guard shook his head with a sigh.

Take it easy, kid. Your guild helps out now and then with stuff. Just tell me what youre here for, okay?

I think I might have bought stolen property. Dallion swallowed. Saying it out loud was worse than it sounded in his head.

The guard arched a brow, then leaned forward. Are you messing with me? This would be the first time someone comes to confess that.

Well, I didnt know it was stolen at the time, Dallion quickly explained. I met an awakened nearby. He told me I shouldnt keep the pouch in the open, all because of the pickpockets. He then took me to his shop, where we got to talking and I bought a weapon.

Dallion paused, trying to gauge the guards reaction. The old man said nothing. Even with Dallions level of perception, it was impossible for him to determine anything based on the guards expression alone.

I decided to go back there again today and buy another weapon and found that the store is owned by an entirely different man. A trader of some sort.

What did he sell you?

A harpsisword.

A harpster? The guard whistled. Not many of those around. What happened? Turns out you cant carry it in the realms?

Err, no. Ive no problem with using it in the realms. Thats the problem. I dont think that he sold me something which was his, and thats why

Show the sword.

Dallion prepared himself mentally for a long tirade of shouting. Instead, the guard didn't seem overly concerned.

Just open your room and get it from there, the old man said.

Huh? Open my room?

You can do that, right?

Yes, but I was told it was a bad idea. Back during the hunt of the chainling Kalis had been adamant never to open his awakened room to anyone else.

Will you stop with your nonsense? the guard snapped. You're on barracks ground. Our captain can enter your room whether you like it or not. Only difference is he'll be pissed that you made him do it. So, take your pick. Open the room and show me the sword, or come with me to the captain.

Neither of the choices were good. If this were a game, Dallion would just hit back and pretend the conversation never happened. Real life was different. There was no way he could undo things, and leaving just like that was definitely not an option.

With a sigh, he performed a personal awakening. A doorway appeared in the wall to the left.

Didn't think I'd see one of those, he said, closely examining the edge of the blade. There are probably five people in Nerosal that have one. How much did you pay for this?

I'm not exactly sure, Dallion mumbled. Technically, it wasn't a lie, but he was more afraid of what the guard would think if Dallion told him the weapon had cost about sixty silver coins. About a hundred, possibly less.

A hundred gold coins? The man gave Dallion a suspicious look.

No! Silvers! A hundred silver coins.

Upon hearing that, the guard laughed.

You've got the Crippled's luck. Something like this is five hundred at least.

Thing is, the sword isn't stolen. The guard took a step back. No idea who got it or how, but it has accepted you as its owner.

That's it? Dallion said instinctively and instantly regretted it. I mean, isn't there a way to check?

Kid, if you take an item that's not yours it'll be screaming to the sky. It takes decades for stolen things to settle down, especially things made out of such metal. Either the guy stole it twenty years ago, or just found it, you've bought it fair. You can close your room, now.

The item was actually his after all? Dallion felt the weight of a mountain fall off his chest. However, the relief he felt also came with questions. Why had Taem sold to him in the first place?

Did you make any promises when you bought it?

No, Dallion tried to recollect the moment. I don't think so.

In that case, count your blessings and get out of here.

A few seconds later the doorway to Dallion's awakening room disappeared along with the harp'sword. Moments later he was back in barracks hall, holding the guard's hand.

Thank you for your time. The guard shook Dallion's hand with an annoyed voice, then pulled it away. Anything else?

Err no, I don't think so.

Then move along. There are others waiting.

The statement was an obvious lie, but Dallion didn't want to overstay his welcome. With a polite and very confused nod, he left the cubicle, moving back to the general area of the hall.

This was it? Undoubtedly not what he expected, and somewhat anticlimactic. It was as if he had been preparing for a hurricane for days, only to be greeted by a gentle breeze. Deep down, he could still feel uncertainty, a faint concern that the real storm was yet to come. Even so, Dallion had no intention of looking a gift horse in the mouth. Taem had sold him the harp'sword, for whatever reason, and that made it officially his. Now all he had to do was learn how

Dallion? a familiar female voice asked a short distance away.

Turning in the appropriate direction, Dallion saw none other than Euryale. The gorgon was standing in a nearby cubicle, filling out a scroll under the watchful eye of a city guard. The gorgon's snakes, however, kept looking at the entire room.

Just give me a moment. I'll be right with you, she said casually all the time writing.

Now that was a useful skill—the ability to see everything around, no matter what one did. Gorgons probably were terrifying opponents in combat, provided they took things seriously.

Stepping towards the wall so as not to block the path of the few people who came in here, Dallion waited for Eury to finish what she was doing. Dressed in a rather provocative toga, the gorgon filled out the scroll—the local equivalent of an official form, if Dallion was to guess—then returned the quill in its ink jar.

Are we done here? she asked the guard in front of her with the most charming smile that could make anyone's blood run cold. The guard was no exception. Catching her drift, the man shivered, then nodded. Good. See you next month. She stood up, twisted around and joined Dallion.

Not being one to want a conversation in the barracks, Dallion hurriedly headed towards the exit. Eury followed. Half a minute later, they were outside the barracks building. Waiting until they had gone another fifty steps, to be on the safe side, Dallion opened his mouth to ask the obvious question.

Why are you here? Euryale turned out to be faster.

I thought my harp'sword might be stolen, so I came here to check. You?

Oh, the usual nonsense. She waved a hand dismissively. Every time I get a new statue the guard comes down to check whether I haven't petrified someone. As if I could do that unnoticed. Half the city will hear the screams if that happened.

The fact that her defense was focused on the lack of witnesses made Dallion have mixed feelings about the matter. On the one hand, he could be relieved that he'd know if Eury had turned anyone to stone. Knowing that she could, though, made him want to double the distance between them.

Your boots are ready, by the way. You can come pick them up if you want.

Liar, Eury let out a single chuckle. You get points for being cute, though.

The next minute passed in silence as they walked to Eury's workshop. Given that Dallion had finished everything city guard related in less than a minute, he had time to spare before his job. Also, even before their unexpected meeting he was thinking of passing by Eury's workshop, anyway. Not so much because of the shoes he still hadn't gathered enough money to pay her back. Rather, there were some awakened matters he wished to discuss with her.

Eury, what's your level? Dallion asked.

It's wiser to ask a man how many levels he's lost than a woman what her current level is, the gorgon replied. Thankfully, she smiled as she spoke.

It's double digits, right?

That much I can confirm.

How do you reach a double digit? I've been reading up on things about the Moons and the skills, but I still have no idea how to break my barriers. Other than the first time, I've mostly relied on awakening shrines or similar. There has to be some other way.

There is, but only once you reach level ten and go through your awakening trial.

Another trial?

Trial, test, moment of realization. Call it what you will. It's something only you can achieve. Until you pass it, you won't be able to go beyond level ten. That's why they call it the second great step. After that you're more than a full awakened.

Am I a doubly full awakened? Dallion smirked.

More or less. A fully awakened is a nice term, but it's false. It only means you have the ability to create echoes and enter areas on your own. The real difference is after level ten. Succeed at your trial there, and you'll be able to improve your skills and stats beyond the level ten cap. Thinking of going for it?

Dallion nodded. I want to learn how to distinguish between marker layers and for that I need to be a double digit.

Power to you. Eury patted him on the shoulder. Keep in mind it'll be a tough trip. It's unlikely you'll make it from the first try.

