

## Leveling up 111

### Chapter 111: Holster Boots

Make yourself at home, Euryale said as they entered her workshop. Ill change and be right with you. The gorgon went into her private room.

Dallion looked around. There were quite a lot of changes since last time. The clothes that he had seen were gone. Stacks of worn down armor were in their place, from leather sets to plate mail pieces. Judging by the materials, the armor was quite high end. Jiroh hadnt exaggerated when shed said that Euryale was good in her craft.

Did you make all this armor? Dallion asked.

Moons, no. The gorgon laughed. I just repair the stuff. Youll never catch me making such chunks of clunk. I just fix them up.

Nice. There was no telling how much they were paying her, but it had to be a small fortune. Even now that mending requests had started to dwindle, Dallion could learn a comfortable lifefar more comfortable than back in his villageand he was just a low-level no-name awakened who worked part time in a tavern.

Found your boots yet?

Dallion looked around some more. Among all the equipment, there was a single pair of boots. They were much bulkier than he imagined, not to mention asymmetrical. The right one went up almost to his knee, while the left stopped mid leg. There was little doubt that a lot of artistic work had gone into it.

Was a bit of a challenge getting that done, Eury said a few steps from Dallion, startling him into a jump.

While she found it amusing, Dallion didnt. Having people be able to sneak up to him unnoticed was becoming more and more concerning. Sooner rather than later he was going to have to learn how they were doing that as well as what to do in order to detect them.

I dont have all the money I promised yet. Dallion opened his money pouch. He had arranged to consolidate his earnings into two gold coins. Hannah didnt seem to mind in the least. In her line of work, she was used to handling all sorts of denominations. Golds were usually reserved for taxes and serious purchases. This is all Ive got. He handed Eury two gold coins.

Dont worry about it. At least you paid something. Jiroh and the rest of those losers think they can get away with favors. See all that? She pointed at the shelves of armor pieces. All require fixing. Good thing they bring me materials, at least.

That explained why she hadnt moved to a bigger workshop.

Anyway, put them on, I want to show you something.

Unable to refuse, Dallion took off his shoes and did as was told. The new boots felt remarkably comfortable, as if they had been made specifically for his foot. Even with her perception level, that was more than impressive.

Walk around a bit. The gorgon said, holding a finger to her chin as she critically scrutinized her work. Do they hurt as you walk?

I dont think so. Dallion bent down, jumped it, then tiptoed for a few steps. Everything seemed perfect. Theyre great.

Theyre okayish at best, Eury said with a surprisingly sharp tone. When it came to work, her personality suddenly shifted, becoming somewhat similar to Hannahs. When I have time and materials, and you have enough money and know what you want, Ill make you something great. Can you feel the dartbow?

Yeah. Dallion moved a bit. The sensation was somewhat strange, as if he had a torn pocket and some change was touching to his skin.

Youll need a new set of trousers. Those I can make for you. Ill add it to your tab. Eury smiled, returning to her usual self. Ive made the boots for awakened fifths, so dont go getting in trouble on the street. If you ever get a bolt clip, keep in mind itll take you several seconds to draw the dartbow and at least as much to put the clip.

I dont plan on getting in trouble.

No one ever plans to Eury shook her head. To Dallions fascination, the snakes kept their relative position, as if they were stuck to the air itself. Are you up for a test?

Sure, I

Before Dallion could finish, Eury gently put her hand on his cheek and entered an awakening realm.

### **Item Awakening**

#### **The RING is Level 23**

Dallion instinctively blinked. At his present level, it still took him a few moments to get used to the new reality. The gorgon clearly didnt have that problem.

**You are in a vast metal domain.**

**Defeat the guardian to change the RINGs destiny.**

Now, that looks much better. All the gorgons snakes turned in his direction.

Dallion felt compelled to look down, and he had to say he agreed. The leather boots had been fine before, but now they were truly magnificent. For one thing, they werent leather anymore; here they were solid pieces of metal that would make most mecha artists jealous. And the best part was that they remained just as flexible as if they were made of leather, even more so.

Is this liquid metal? Dallion tapped on them. They definitely felt hard on the outside, as if he had put on a pair of greaves.

Liquid metal, the gorgon mused. I like that. Now all you need is a proper buckler and youll be set for some real fighting.

Can I use them to attack? he asked.

Yes and no, Eury replied, walking further away from him. Its possible, but you need acrobatic skills to do any actual damage. Anyway, lets try a few things. She reached into the air. A throwing knife appeared in her hand. You said you wanted to learn? I can teach you a thing or two, but I had a condition.

Dallion nodded. He was prepared for that. In fact, he was surprised she hadnt brought it up earlier. Despite her funny and flirty nature, the gorgon was a solo artisan which meant she had to have enough trading skills to stay in the black.

Youll owe me a favor for each thing I teach you. Okay?

Not the best deal, but beggars couldnt be choosers.

Do questions count as teaching? Dallion asked.

Depends on the question, Eury laughed. But generally, no. You cant do what you dont know. But knowing isnt the same as doing.

As I am now, do you think I can break into double digits?

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

Before Dallion could blink, the gorgon had disappeared. A circle of green markers surrounded him, trapping him like a wall. Boots and bucklers filled the air, not to mention all the steps had created a green spot on the floor.

Dallions mind went into overdrive. So many options were the same as having no options at all. He couldnt even determine where Eury was going to attack from. Before he could make up his mind, the gorgon appeared again, a step away. One of her hands grabbed his buckler while the other split the air, thrusting forward until it barely touched the tip of his nose.

This was a critical attack, she said. It would have knocked you out and prevented you from using guard skills for half a minute, maybe more in your state. She let go and disappeared again.

Shock froze Dallion, prettifying him as if he had glanced in the gorgons face-eyes.

His body moved again, letting him draw his dartbow. As he did, an after-shadow of Eury appeared. It lasted less than a split second long enough to indicate she was attacking, but too short for him to do anything about it. Instinctively, Dallion squeezed the trigger.

Before the bolt was released, Eury was next to him once more, pushing his right hand up. Her right hand took the dartbow out of his hand with such ease, as if she was taking a flower from a vase.

This could have been a critical attack, she explained, holding Dallions dartbow. Pain is brief in the realms, but its possible to render an arm or leg useless for a long period of time. Having an arm disabled for a minute is the same as having lost it. She disappeared again.

This was outright embarrassing. Even March hadnt toyed with Dallion like this. Could that mean that Euryale was stronger than March? That was highly unlikely.

Jumping to the side, Dallion looked to his left. In his mind, he counted to five. That was the time limit in which he thought Eury would attack. Once it was gone, he leapt forward, then abruptly spun around. Images of the gorgon appeared in front of him. No longer invisible, she was running towards him. Without question, her speed was twice his at least, but at least now he could see her approach. On cue, the vast majority of defense markers disappeared, leaving him with a dozen options still a lot, but nowhere as many as before.

Just as he thought that, the image of the gorgon split into four instances. Each charged at him, attacking from a different direction. This was nothing new. Dallion had experienced the phenomenon in battle before. Unfortunately, just as before, he had no way of determining which attack she would choose. Gambling, he decided to go with the one he could defend against and was wrong. Euryale slid past his defense, her fist stopping an inch from his face again.

Good logic, she said. But this would have been your final hit.

Euryale lowered her arm. All the markers around Dallion disappeared.

You think of your feet and have good instincts, but thats what it would take to fight a double digit, she said. The dartbow gives an advantage, but youve still to master its techniques.

Adzorg had said something of the sort as well.

Without learning a few basic things, you wont even make it to your level ten trial. Fortunately, I can teach you a few tricks that you wont find in books, plus a lot that you would. Maybe it was Dallions imagination, but he could have sworn that he saw half of the gorgons snakes wink at him in synch. One question. How did you guess where I was going to attack from?

I knew you attack from where I couldnt see, so I made sure not to look in that direction for long enough, Dallion replied.

You baited me? The gorgon seemed amused.

The patron moon of your species is Emion, Dallion recited. For once, the scroll Nil had made him read was good for something. That means your strongest attribute is perception.

Cute and smart? Yes, it is. But as you saw, you cannot rely on knowledge alone. You seem pretty good in the theory department, but you lack practice.

And Ill tell you where to get it.

Chapter 112: Lesson and Favor

Well start with something simple. Euryale walked several steps away until the distance between her and Dallion was thirty feet. This will be your first lesson. She raised the dartbow she had taken from him in the air. How do you use this?

Dallion wasnt sure what to say. He knew that the question wasnt as obvious as it seemed, but at the same time he had no idea what answer she was looking for.

You point and shoot? He decided to play it safe.

Okay. Do it.

Both of them stood still for several seconds. After that Dallion took a step forward in Euryales direction.

Wrong, the gorgon said, taking a step back.

What do you mean wrong? Dallion blinked. Didnt you say that I needed to shoot the dartbow? I need to take it from you first.

Yes, you do. But thats not the way to do it. She pointed to the ground. The reason I cant use the weapon against you, is because it doesnt belong to me. In the realms, you can only use weapons that belong to you. Just as Im unable to shoot at you with your dartbow, Im also unable to hurt you. The only thing I could do is to prevent you from shooting at me, as Ive just done.

That was strange. Dallion distinctly remembered being able to touch the weapons in Aspions awakening room. Then again, his mother had told him that he could only touch a skill if the Seven Moons allow it.

If it doesnt belong to you, how come you can hold it? Dallion asked.

Youre catching on. I can only hold it because its here. And its only here because you are keeping it. She tossed the weapon on the floor. It rattled on the solid surface. Since youre the bookworm, you know that everything in the realms is a concept. Youre not you, Im not me, this building isnt a building. The only reason everything is here is because its part of us. And as such we can control it.

You can control the ring? Dallion instinctively looked at the ground. That would be a useful skill to have, also very terrifying.

The guardians do that. They are the embodiment of the items, but they have their limitations. Back to your dartbow. When you came here, it was on your holster. Guess what, you have no holster in the real world, so why is it here?

Dallion looked at the empty holster. That was a good question. He had assumed that the holster was part of the weapon, at least that much was consistent with everything else he had. The swords came with a sheath and his buckler was always strapped to his arm.

Suddenly a most peculiar thought came to mind. What if it was the holster that was the weapon? Dallion vaguely remembered part of King Arthurs legend from class. In it, Merlin had said that the sheath was worth ten Excaliburs.

Good. Thats generally the first thing an awakened child is taught.

Somehow Dallion didnt take that as a compliment. Even so, he was glad to have learned the logic behind that trick. During the fight in the dagger, Falkner had used the method a lot, constantly dropping and re-summoning his weapons. With enough practice, this could be a huge battle advantage.

Dallion drew the dartbow and shot a bolt. In the same action, he let go of the weapon. The dartbow appeared in his holster on the instant; after which it was snatched by Dallion and show again.

Its much more efficient with blades. The gorgon explained. But the dartbow has its uses as well. With enough practice youll be able to call it directly in your hand. Then things will really get interesting.

No doubt they would. Dallion already imagined himself shooting multiple times, then switching hands only by thinking about it. Not to mention this way he could pretty much shoot at two targets almost simultaneously with the same dartbow.

Okay, and now the good part.

Dallion swallowed. There was an even better part? What possibly could it be? Maybe there was a way to combine weapons in the awakened realms? That would definitely be good. If he could combine the dartbow with a sword, or better with his harpsisword or batter with his buckler! He could see it now a shield that launched dozens of bolts in all directions, honing towards their targets like homing missiles using the power of his music skills.

The awakened realm crumbled, returning him in the gorgons workshop. Confused, Dallion looked around. Was this part of the thing he was supposed to learn?

Hold just a moment. Eury disappeared into her room. A while later she emerged, tossing him a green and golden shirt. Put that on.

Dallion looked at it, then opened. It was much more delicate than what he was wearing now. If her skills were to be any indication, there was every chance that the gold threats were plated armor. If it were anything like the shoes, hed have much better protection in the awakened realms.

You can leave the other one here, the gorgon said, while giving him a critical look with half her snakes. And pick up your shoes. Were throwing those away.

Dallions first reaction was to protest, but given the quality of everything around him, he couldnt make himself go through with it. The shoes he had been wearing so farhis crown achievement upon leaving the villagewere an eyesore.

Where are we going? he asked as he grabbed them.

Dinner, the gorgon replied. Your treat.

Wait, what? Dallion paused for a few moments, just to make sure that he hadnt misheard. Had the gorgon just invited him out? Judging by her reaction, that was probably something normal, even if it came out of the blue.

Dinner. One trick, one favor, remember? She went towards the exit. The most ominous part was that she could still keep a few dozen eyes on Dallion, even with her back turned.

But I have work Dallion began.

I know, thats why well go to the Gremlin. Been a while since I ate there. Food is generally good.

There was no getting out of it. Dallion could argue that Hannah had a strict policy of no girls in the tavern, but that would be a good excuse. Then again, there was nothing wrong with that. The only reason for his hesitation was the suddenness. Everything aside, this was the second time he had met Euryale, even if she did seem to have a rather free lifestyle.

As the two made their way to the Gremlins Timepiece, Dallion scanned the people around, observing their reaction. No one seemed the least bit bothered, or even intrigued, that a gorgon was walking among them. By the time the two reached the inn, the previous anxiousness was replaced by a new fearwhat would Hannah say. There was only one way to find out.

Hey, hey, Dallion greeted the innkeeper the moment he came in.

Hannah gave him a serious glance, as if saying I dont know what you did wrong, but I just know you have. Her glance quickly moved to the gorgon.

Eury, she said in a measured fashion. Havent seen you around in a while.

I know. The gorgon offered a polite smile. Thats why I decided to see you. Like what youve done with the place. You must have awakened.

The innkeeper sighed.

Quite good work, too. Id say youre ready for the crowds. Eury made her way to a table in the corner and sat down. Uncertain what to do, Dallion hesitated for a second, then followed. Oh, dont mind me. Ill wait here until the crowd has thinned. Ill have my usual, Hannah. The gorgon tossed a coin in the innkeepers directionit was a gold piece. You remember what it was, I take it?

Hannah caught the coin, then tucked it away in her pouch.

Dallion, we have customers, the innkeeper said. Bring her something to drink and get ready for the crowd.

An unusual request since there was about half an hour left before the first of them started showing up. Even the regulars werent here yet, making the room particularly empty.

Lemonade, Eury said. A whole pitcher, no honey. Tell Aspan its for me, hell know what to do.

Okay. Dallion was starting to feel more and more nervous. Is there anything I should know? Between you and this place, I mean?

Theres nothing going on between her and this place, Hannah raised her voice from the counter. Not anymore. Not since she left.

Left? Dallion blinked.

I used to be the inns awakened, Eury said with a curt smile. That was years ago, before I finally bought a place of my own.

As it turned out, things were more complicated than Dallion thought, though not as bad as he feared. No doubt about it, the gorgon hadnt left on good terms. Apparently, she had been an employee of the place way back, along with Jiroh. The reason for her coming to the city remained unknown, but Eury had diligently done her job for years. There had been several problems from Dallion could make out, though none of them meriting more than a shouting match between her and Hannah. Then, one day, the gorgon had simply taken all her things and left. No reason was given, no letter, not even a single goodbye. She had packed up and left Nerosal altogether. Half a year later, she had come back and rented a workshop where she remained today.

The first Twenty minutes Dallion spent exclusively with Eury. Excluding the fact that Hannah would give them disapproving glares every now and again, one could say It was almost like a date. Both were unwilling to talk about their past, so the conversation was centered on city highlights, fashion, and awakened stories. When it came to the latter, it was Dallion doing most of the talking. Eury would add to the conversation every now and again, but she rarely mentioned any actual battles shed had. The only thing that Dallion managed to learn from her was that she had improved an item to level twenty, after which she had stopped. The number seemed ridiculously high from Dallions point of view.

At one point the standard patrons began arriving, forcing Dallion to return to his usual duties. A few days without, Jiroh had brushed up his waiter skills to the point that Hannah felt confident enough to let him do it on his own. The mending requests had trickled down single-digit numbers, and the improvements remained at three. It was safe to say that the initial interest had faded, despite Dallions charming demeanor. While pleased with his service, the patrons mostly preferred to enjoy their food, while the curious had likely found another inn in Nerosal to spend their money.

As evening turned into night, the customers started to leave. One by one the tables emptied, leaving Dallion to clean them up and mend what damages there were.

Youre training with her, arent you? Hannah pulled him over at one point.

Err, yes, Dallion replied, fully aware that Eury could see and hear the conversation.

Unless youre really desperate, Id tell you not to. The innkeeper glanced at the gorgon. A few dozen snakes glanced back. Thats your business, but move too close to the flame and youll get burned.



Because shes a gorgon? Dallion couldnt help himself.

Because shes

Hello, Hannah, a high-pitched voice interrupted. It didnt take any guesswork on anyones part to guess who it belonged to. Im finally back. How did you cope without me? Jiroh smiled, standing at the entrance.

### Chapter 113: Guild Jobs

The first thought that went through Dallions mind upon seeing Jiroh standing there was that hed finally not have to serve people during lunch and dinner. The second thought was mild curiosity at the tattered state of her clothes; it was as if shed been on a three-month journey through swamps and forests without access to modern conveniences. Interestingly enough, her face and hair were perfect, as if shed come out of a magazine cover photoshoot.

Youre early, Hannah grunted a subtle admission she was glad to see her.

It happens from time to time. Nice to see the old crowd getting together, the fury entered, oblivious to the recent conversation. Or maybe it was the exact opposite? Nice rags, Jiroh said, looking at Dallion. Hope Eury didnt charge you too much for them.

Dont worry, youll get the tab. The gorgon raised her pitcher of lemonade in greeting. Come join me. Things were getting slow anyway.

Well be closing soon, Hannah said with a sharp edge. Staff and patrons only.

Then Ill rent a room. A cluster of snakes focused on the innkeeper. Or are all your rooms full.

With a disapproving snort, Hannah went into the kitchen. Jiroh waited for her to go, then joined the gorgon. Dallion hesitated. On the one hand, he was curious what Jiroh was up to, on the other he could tell they had private things to discuss.

Ill leave you two to catch up, he said, giving them ample opportunity to invite him to join them. The silent nods suggested that they preferred he didnt.

Finishing a glass of water, Dallion then went upstairs to his room. Considering the time, he hesitated whether to go directly to bed. Still feeling enthusiastic from the training earlier on, he chose to enter the library instead. After all, it was only going to take a moment. Boots still on, Dallion went to the place he had stashed the harpsisword and took hold. Moments later, he was in the library ring.

At least youre not wasting time, the echo said with a note of disapproval. When I suggested you make some useful friends, this isnt exactly what I had in mind.

Dallion didnt respond, too busy looking at his shirt. To his disappointments, it had turned out to be nothing but a fancy shirt. There were no armor elements, no special insignias, nothing but normal threads of gold along the silk.

I would advise that you read up on gorgon culture as quickly as possible. Nil said, placing another large tome in Dallions reading area. That said, the advice she gave you was adequate, although it skipped a few steps along the way.

Can you see everything I do? Dallion snapped at the echo.

As long as you carry me, yes.

Does that mean that I can spy on people by talking to their guardians? Dallion asked.

Of course if you can get a guardian to talk. Now stop talking nonsense and lets get to something serious. Youve got a lot of books set aside, but have only skimmed through a few. If youre serious about learning the basics, youll have to do a lot better.

Nil, what level are you?

The question made the echo freeze, then frown. From what Dallion had seen so far, Nil wasnt one to stop talking no matter the circumstances. In effect he was pretty much an internet search engine with an opinion of his own. Having him react in such a way was atypical.

Nil?

Im a double digit, lets leave it at that, the echo replied. One thing youre better to learn every awakened has a story. Not all wish to share it. If a time comes and someone does, be grateful that they have.

Things had suddenly gotten serious, but Dallion understood what the old echo had in mind. Dallion himself had changed his name so as not to be associated with his grandfather. Why would other awakened coming to Nerosal be any different? What he had considered to be normal, was pretty much prying. Apparently, it was different for the lower levels, but everyone of significant strength Dallion had seen so far was very tight-lipped about it, starting from the soldiers in the chainling hunt. Dallion knew they were double digits, but beyond that

Do you think Im ready to become a double digit? Dallion asked.

At present? Nil shook his head. Highly unlikely.

What about reaching level ten?

On your own, that would be difficult. Youll need an awakening shrine of help from the Order. Otherwise, with your rate of development it will probably take years.

Years for a natural leveling up. That was definitely too long.

What about the daggers?

The dagger was an ancient form of awakening shrine. As it should have been explained to you in depth, the daggers were made so that an awakened could reach their level of proficiency. Didnt it seem like an odd coincidence that the dagger has five levels as well?

In hindsight it was possible to say that; the theory definitely seemed more likely than Dallions although he had been correct so far each of the four levels were linked to an attribute. The question was whether the ones in the awakening shrine were? Thinking back, they had a theme as well, although it was different or was it? Lacking the first two levels made it difficult to be certain.

Without a dagger youll have to rely on a ten-level shrine, Nil said. Not impossible, provided you have the funds, which at the moment you definitely dont.

*Ouch.*

Finding a temple wont be difficult. If youd bothered to go about the city, youd know that by now. Due to city law, awakening temples must assist all registered awakened to improve. For that reason, the Order has imposed a trial tax, otherwise there will never be the end of it.

Wow.

Its not as bad as that. Just consider the alternative. Since there are no consequences, the temples would be swarmed with people making attempt after attempt in the hopes of getting lucky. Add a monetary element and only people certain of their abilities would try to give their best, not quit halfway through a trial.

An interesting point. Dallion still didnt see why the Order couldnt just allow people to go for free. There were other ways of making sure the system wasnt abused.

How much are we talking about?

Ten gold coins.

What?!

One for every level you could potentially reach.

If Nil was more than an echo, Dallion would have challenged him to a fight, just to test his strength. As it stood, that was a terrible idea. A single hit and the echo would vanish, no matter how skilled.

Anything else you needed help with?

No, Nil, thanks. Dallion looked at his reading space, then away. I think Ill skip the reading for the moment. I need to think over some things.

In the blink of the eye, Dallion was back in his room. In the past he would take every opportunity to mend and improve items, grumbling about how the daily limitation constrained him. Now, when could improve nine items per day, he had a more strategic look on things. It wasnt so much to thoughtlessly go and beat up as many guardians as he could. Rather, he had to find a plan on how to move forward, if not hell never breach his next wall and remain one step from double digits and that wasnt something Dallion intended to allow.

Goodnight, Dallion said out loud, knowing that dozens of guardians had heard him.

The morning came before he knew it. Unlike before Dallion felt actually relaxed for once. The lingering feeling of sleepiness and fatigue wasnt there.

This early it was a quick run to the guild house. The streets were mostly empty, with only a few people setting up shop and the occasional person walking about.

While running, Dallion briefly switched to the realm of the library ring to ask whether anyone was at the guild. According to the echo, several people were, including Estezol, whose duties also included assigning guild jobs. Nil added a few other comments about guild personnel, most of them highly critical that was the one of the benefits of having the echo of a guild captain. Despite his gambling habit, Adzorg liked to keep an eye on everything going on.

Pausing to catch his breath for a moment, Dallion charged in every second in the real world was valuable.

Morning, Dal, the short bearded man greeted him, as if he was expecting him. Glad that you're doing okay. After what happened at the trial, I thought it would be a week until you got back to your feet.

A week? That sounded a bit extreme. Then again, Dallion had friends who considered going into the college of their choice the goal of their lives. Just waiting for the results had rendered some of them into nervous wrecks.

Feeling much better. Dallion decided to play along. I thought I'd get my mind off things, so I came to see what's going on here.

That's the spirit! Always good to be positive. As you can see, things are a bit slow here. A lot of the regular members are off on missions. We must prepare for the upcoming event.

Talking about missions, that's why I'm here. Dallion smiled. I heard that I can take on jobs even without having a mentor? Easy ones, at least?

Oh, definitely. Estezol took out a scroll and a quill. Any preference?

Err, something that pays well?

Don't we all want that? The bearded man laughed. No, I meant what type of job do you want? Generally, we have three basic types: improvement, sanitation, and exploration.

Err, okay Dallion nodded. He had no idea what sanitation was, but it sounded like something he would definitely not want to do.

Improvement jobs improving an item to a certain level. In most cases, people use the local shops to do that, but if they want to get something improved fast and to a high level, they hire a guild.

Tempting, but I don't think I can improve things that much. Even now Dallion had improved items up to level six at most.

Oh, don't worry, you'll only do the lower levels. Since improvements are limited per day, the guild separates the job into categories. Low rank members improve the easy levels and the rest take it

from there. Its not that much fun, but its good money, and its quick. You dont have to rest a lot after a few improvements.

That much was true. Dallion could handle five improvements per day without issue, even if he felt starving afterwards.

Sanitation, I wouldnt recommend. While March encourages members getting their hands dirty, its a pretty thankless job, and doesnt pay that much. Think of it as a service to the city.

If you say so And the last?

The last is a bit different. Estezol stroked his beard. It pays better, but can be difficult. Its sort of like the trial you had. Every guild constantly gets ancient items. In order to find out what the items do, we must fulfill their destiny. For that, a party enters the items realm and clears all the levels. The difference from your exam is that theres no telling how long this might last, or what you might find.

This is the Icepicker guild, Estezol laughed. Of course, there are available. Are you sure you want to go on one, though? Youll just be a packrat, so things might be a lot different from what you expect.

There are a few groups who were missing a packrat. Estezol looked through the scroll, then jotted something down with his quill. Give me a few minutes. Ill let the group know. Just try not to overdo it on your first mission, okay?

## Chapter 114: Item Exploration

Estezol had been correct when he had said that joining an exploration mission would be very different from what Dallion had expected. To make matters worse, the bearded man couldnt even fathom the depth of Dallions actual expectations. In truth, he hadnt even come close.

In his mind, Dallion was ready for adventures in deep and mysterious caves, fighting off monsters, gathering loot or at least monster components as well as a rare mineral or two. He was well aware that ordinary objects found in a realm couldnt be taken out of it, but he had hoped ancient artefacts to be an exception to the rule, allowing him to obtain one of the rare materials that went into making awakened weapons and gear. Reality had a different opinion.

After the rest of the party arrived two guild members, both younger than Dallion all three were taken to a room on the second floor. There had been four beds in the room, arranged so as to form the letter X. Two of the beds were covered in weapons, shields, and other items, allowing them to be in contact with the skin of the person who lay on top. A small table with a strangely shaped metallic device was placed between the beds, at arms length.

The two guild members had laid down on the weapon beds, while Dallion took one of the remaining two, his harpsisword within reach. Once settled in, he was asked to reach behind him with his free hand and touch the item they were going to explore. The next thing he knew, Dallion was inside the sphere item, along with two very overburdened party members. Alas for him, they didnt remain overburdened for long. Immediately, he was given all excess weapons and items, making him feel like an over glorified caddy.

### **The KALEIDEVRISCO is Level 0 of 3**

**You are at the START of the KALEIDEVRISCOs first level.**

**Unseal all levels to fulfill the KALEIDEVRISCOs destiny.**

The rectangles kept floating in the air.

Whats a kaleidevrisko? Dallion asked, attempting to adjust the load he was carrying. Right now he deeply regretted taking the harpsisword along.

No idea, Janna replied. She was the most senior of the group and adept in all four types of combat skills. Back on Earth she could pass as a Valkyrie, if Valkyries could be geeky, cheerful and five foot two. She had the most raven black hair Dallion had seen in his life, as well as enough armor and weapons to pull off the look. We just need to clear the levels and.

So, youre Marchs chosen? Kallan asked. He was barely taller than Janna, with just as black hair. All in all, it was normal, since from what Dallion had learned the two were siblings born a year apart. Apparently, their parents were also part of the guild which made it almost obligatory for them to join since their awakening. That also means that they heard a lot of inside gossip, much to Dallions dismay.

Thats what they say. Dallion grunted.

*Do we really need all this?*

Dallion wondered, although he would never dare say the question out loud. Being a pack rat to a bunch of children.

Rough choice on the exam, though they say you handled yourself well in a party. Most newbies dont.

Just remember that youre the packrat here, Janna reminded. Well take care of the critters, you just stay back.

Right.

There was no chance Dallion would learn anything on this mission. Then again, at least it was going to pay well. From what Estezol had said, the payment of this item was a flat fee plus a bonus based on the actual value of the item once fully awakened.

The starting point of the item was pitch black, just like the fourth level of the dagger. The only light came from the three lanterns strapped to Dallions back and belt. By the way the Valkyrie siblings

had positioned themselves in relation to Dallion, he could tell they had done this sort of job before many times. Each walked to the side, almost against the wall of the dark tunnel.

It was also interesting to note that none of them spoke as they walked, very much unlike Dallion's previous party. Maybe there was a thing or two he could learn from them after all.

About half a minute in, Kallan stopped, making a sign for the rest to do as well. Dallion looked forward, trying to see any sign of a creature. He couldn't. The weight of his baggage diminished as two sets of swords disappeared, emerging in the siblings' hands.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

Red markers appeared, starting from the sword and moving forward like Tron lines. This was the first time Dallion had seen attack markers function in this way. Not only weren't they in a straight line, but they changed size as well. It was like the solution to a maze labyrinth taken out of context. Moments later the duo rushed/darted forward into the darkness.

Uncertain what to do, Dallion ran forward as well. As he tried to catch up, the sound of growls and sword swooshes filled the air. It was apparent that a fight had started, the only issue was that Dallion still couldn't see what his team was fighting. Another thirty steps later, the light from the lanterns finally helped him witness the scene.

Janna and Kallan were in a crowd of goblin-like creatures with sharp claws and scaly skin. They were outnumbered at least twenty to one, but that didn't hinder them in the least. If anything, it made their fighting far more impressive. Up till now, Dallion had thought of fighting as a simple slashing, jabbing, or piercing. Nothing in the behavior of all the people he'd fought had made him think otherwise. How wrong he had been. Blades slid through the air, moving in zigzag fashion without stopping. When they cut through an enemy, they'd continue to the next, forming a line of slaughter.

**Species: Cave Goblin**

**Class: Earth**

**Statistics: 100% HP**

**Skills:**

- **Claw slash**

- **Shard bite**

**Weak Spots: Base of neck**

Whatever the species was, it wasn't presenting any challenge whatsoever. Observing the fight from a safe distance, like a pack mule, Dallion decided to use his music skills to see the state of the creatures. The blue hue that filled them was unmistakable fear. It stood to reason Dallion wouldn't feel confident if he had to face these two, either. Still, after a while he began to see the pattern to their actions. While difficult to spot initially, there was a rhythm to their strikes. With a bit of luck, he could probably block against a few of their attacks, although he was smart to know that the end

result would likely be the same. Not only was their speed vastly superior, they were combining attacks with athletic and acrobatic skills.

Less than a minute from the start of combat, it was all over. Whatever goblins there were had been poofed out of existence, leaving only the party behind.

Thats all of them, Kallan said as he walked up to Dallion and handed him his weapons. A bit stronger than expected. Usually doesnt take us that long.

Dallion nodded, even if it was obvious that the boy was exaggerating.

So, what did you think?

What can I say? Dallion shrugged, tucking in the blades among the rest of the equipment he was carrying. First time I see that wave attack. Attack and athletics? He tested.

And acrobatics, Kallan corrected with a smug expression. You have to be a double digit to pull it off.

Im sure. So that was it? Now we go on and face the guardian?

Its not that simple. Janna approached and handed her blades as well. We have to find it first.

Find the guardian? Dallion looked forward. It was only now that he noticed something that the darkness had obscured the tunnel split into three, each continuing in a different direction.

This isnt a testing dagger, Kallan smirked. Theres more than a single tunnel. Thats why they call it an exploration mission. No one knows where the guardian chamber is, even among similar artefacts. The testing daggers are the only exception.

Fascinating. It actually was like a dungeon quest, only without the minimap. However, Dallion felt that there was still one thing that didnt quite fit.

Is there anything else in the rest of the level? Dallion asked.

What do you mean? Janna looked at him with a puzzled expression.

If the level is like a small maze with the guardian room hidden somewhere, what about the rest of the level? Is there anything else interesting there?

The siblings looked at each other.

Were only supposed to clear the levels, Janna said in a slightly hesitant voice. Theres no requirement to clean everything.

But what if theres something to be discovered? Maybe this is a sort of mending labyrinth? If you kill all the creatures something might happen.

Maybe, but thats for someone else to do. We only need to clear the levels so they light up.

There it was again, that inexplicable lack of curiosity. Maybe Dallion thought differently because this was his first mission, but he couldnt imagine being in a dungeon and not killing every threat, let alone not exploring every inch of the level. Janna and Kallan seemed to treat all this like a nine-to-five job: do the absolute minimum to get things done and move on.



Janna looked at her brother.

I think its stupid, Kallan replied. Weve never done it differently. And I dont think itll be any different if we kill all the creatures on the level or not.

Maybe not, but at least youll know for sure. Also, youll know that youve completed the level at a hundred percent.

The argument was weak, especially for someone who wasnt a gamer. Even so, against all odds, Kallan agreed.

Alright. Well try it. But if the level is too big we stop!

Dallion nodded. He had no intention of arguing, even if he could have pointed out that they needed to find the guardian chamber anyway, so clearing the entire level was a good idea, nonetheless. A few minutes later and they were off again, walking at a faster pace.

As the exploration went on there were several more encounters, mostly against goblins of one type or another, but now and again there would be another creature presentone that Dallion had grown to know well: cracklings.

You can sense more, cant you, Nox? Dallion whispered. In his awakening room, he felt the crackling cub mew affirmatively. Good work. Let me know if you feel anything close.

This is starting to get boring, Kallan complained a short distance ahead.

We still havent found the guardian chamber, Janna reminded.

When we find it, I say we kill it directly. Let someone else worry about the creatures.

Although he said that, Dallion noticed that the boy deliberately avoided certain paths, as if conveniently knowing which direction to go so as not to find the chamber.

With each tunnel they followed, Dallion filled up his mental map of the level. Thanks to his mind increase, this activity was a thousand times easier than it had been before. If he closed his eyes, he could almost visualize the layout before his very eyes. That is why when reached another dead end, he knew that the exploration of the level had pretty much ended. Only two unexplored spots remained, both surrounded by the explored area. One spot inevitably held the guardians chamber, as for the other Dallions theory was that it was the home to a cracks nest.

## Chapter 115: Devoted Perfectionist

Two spots remained for the first level of the kaleidervisco to be completely uncovered. Normally people would be worried that the spot they would go to first might be full of monsters. Dallion was more concerned that they might reach the guardians chamber before defeating everything else. Thankfully, the crackling was able to guide him in the right direction.

So far, Dallion had kept the existence of his familiar a secret from everyone. He suspected that a few people knew of it, at the very least the librarian echo, though thankfully they hadnt said anything on the subject. In turn, Dallion hadnt resorted to using its powers too much, either. Still, it

wouldnt be a bad idea to spend some time in his awakened room to play with the small critter. If the creature was anything like a guardian, it wouldnt appreciate being neglected. As a matter of fact, the same logic was true for ordinary cats as well.

How come there are no cats in the city? Dallion asked all of a sudden.

Janna and Kallan looked at him.

I mean I havent seen any so far. Come to think of it, other than birds, he hadnt seen any animals while walking on the streets. Not a single dog, or cat, or even a rat.

Theyre not liked much, Kellan replied.

Does that mean theyre not allowed?

No, just not liked. He turned around.

Dad has a leopard, Janna said. But yeah, theyre not much liked.

The way she said it gave Dallion the unshakable feeling that this dislike was by popular demand. More-likely it had to do with the noble who controlled the city area. In Dherma village, there were lots of creatures. Mice were a particular nuisance, although even there they avoided all food storage areas. Despite the terror that Aspion had caused, at least he had made sure that the villages food supply was protected. All the wild animalswolves, boards, and so onactually came from the outside and even they stopped at the village limits.

Thinking about Dherma made Dallion wonder about Gloria. It had only been weeks since he left her, but already it seemed like a lifetime. In true time it might as well have been. Last, she and her brother had taken over the burden of power along with the village elders. Dallion had asked her to join him to Nerosal, but she had been adamantthere were things that had to be done in the village. No doubt by now more than a few houses had been leveled up. Maybe she and Veil had even managed to improve the village itself? Knowing their skills and ambition it wasnt out of the question. If there was a way for them to increase their level to the double digits, they had probably found it. That was why Dallion didnt have to lag behind.

Not liked, got you, he said with a smile. Its to the right from here. He pointed as they reached an intersection. That corridor.

Sure? Kellan asked.

Absolutely. No idea what the chamber will be like, but theres a crack nest there.

The siblings reached into the air. This time a new set of weapons emerged in their handsKellan had called a triple flail and a shield, while his sister was holding two large bucklers with razor-sharp edges.

When we get there, you stay in the back, Janna instructed. We only need a bit of light.

Got you. Dallion swallowed his pride. They could have at least offered him to help. Good thing that the rewards were shared among party members, otherwise hed never get anywhere.

The chamber was longer than it was large. Pitch black, like everything else on this level, Dallion could sense the echo of his footsteps from further in. A short distance away, Dallions party members suddenly stopped. This time he didnt need to ask whydespite the light coming from his lanterns, part of the chamber wars remained pitch black.

## COMBAT INITIATED

A wave of snakes shot out of the walls, targeting the siblings. They were somewhat similar to the black tendrils Dallion had seen when facing the crackling, but also different. For one thing, they were much weaker, easily sliced by Janna and Kallans attacks. However, for each creature that was killed, five more appeared.

Following the siblings progress, Dallion took a step forward. Until arriving in this chamber none of them had suffered a single hit. Against the cracks, however, they had already lost ten percent each. Even so, it was obvious they were winning the blackness on the chamber walls was slowly retreating further away.

Need any help? Dallion shouted, more so to act as moral support. These creatures were much stronger than the ones he had fought in the realm of the well.

Stay back! Kallan shouted, throwing his weapons. A crossbow appeared in his arms.

One glance was enough for Dallion to figure out why that weapon was worthy of his name and not the dartbow he had with him. He had seen firsthand how impressive the crossbow looked, but seeing it in action was truly spectacular. The crossbow didnt only shoot four bolts simultaneously, it shot four clusters of bolts. Like missiles, each of them splintered into a dozen parts, causing devastating damage to whole sections of the wall. Spot after spot of darkness disappeared with every shot. Janna had also stopped her standard attacks, focusing on guarding her brother as the green markers suggested. Thats what real teamwork was: two players in perfect synch, focused on a single goal.

As the duo moved further in the chamber, Dallion followed, bringing them just enough light to be efficient. At one point, the end of the cave became visible. A few more shots of the crossbow and the remaining black spots were gone.

## DEVOTED PERFECTIONIST!

**When you start a job, you like to see it through. Its good that you want to clean every single little smudge you see, just dont become obsessed with it.**

A blue rectangle appeared. Dallion smiled. His Earth years of dungeon exploring had not gone to waste. What was more, it seemed that he wasnt the only one to have received the prize. Janna and Kallan were also looking at the rectangle.

Suddenly, Dallion felt that the chamber became much brighter.

Nice, a med one! Janna said, much to Kallans dismay. You really knew what you were talking about. She glanced at Dallion.

Its a coincidence, Kallan grumbled. Not worth the fifteen percent health. He tossed his crossbow to Dallion, who was fast enough to catch it before it hit the ground. Come on, we still have the guardian to fight.

How many achievements have you found? Janna asked as they were making their way to the last unexplored section of the level.

Im not sure. Five, maybe six? The next time Dallion returned to his awakened room, maybe a visit to his library would be a good idea.

Wow. And youve only been awakened for a month.

Everyone keeps saying thats a big deal. Is it?

Not much, Kallan said. Late bloomers usually are slow. Youre an exception and they say exceptions grow to become geniuses. We got awakened when we were five.

Now it was Dallions turn to be impressed. Being awakened at five what did that even feel like? At that age people could barely read properly, let alone make fundamental decisions such as what skills to choose. Suddenly it made sense why most awakened werent given a choice.

Dallion could only imagine the amount of time they had spent practicing to get to where they were. Decades of information trapped in the body of a child They had the knowledge, but hadnt matured. For better or worse, the way awakening worked seemed to have this effect.

Hey, if they think Im good, what does that say about you, since Im your packrat? Dallion laughed. Seriously, you guys are doing all the fighting. Im just here learning for the time being. Lets keep it at that and kick that guardians ass, alright?

There was no telling what the guardian would be. Judging by his experience in the dagger, though, Dallion suspected that theyll be facing something more intelligent than the common guardian.

The wait to the guardian chamber was short now that Dallion had remembered the layout of the level. Once there, the siblings picked geared up, while also taking a lantern each.

How about I join in? Dallion asked.

Well still need to change weapons during the fight, Janna explained

Cant you do it if I leave the stuff here?

Theres a limit to how far they can be.

Then, what if I drop them on the floor once the fighting starts? I want to learn a few things as well. Besides, I can use music and

No, Kallan cut him short. Youre a newbie member. You dont even have a mentor. Whatever the guild thinks of you, they didnt give you a personal emblem. That means they dont trust your

judgement. I don't either. Getting an achievement was cool, but it's not fighting. Until I change my mind, you'll just be a packrat.

Dallion didn't say a thing, but the expression on his face said it for him.

It'll be the same with every group you join, Kallan added. A personal guild emblem is more than skill.

That didn't seem particularly fair, especially since Arthuro's had practically been carried to success during the previous trial. On the other hand, he had been sneaky enough to take the win the moment it was offered to him.

I'll just sit in the back and watch, Dallion said. However, that didn't mean he couldn't use his music skills.

As they walked into the chamber, Dallion made a note of the weapons the siblings had equipped. Going against an unknown, Kallan had taken a broadsword which was three quarters his size, as well as a full tower shield. Janna, in turn, had grabbed his crossbow. In her place, Dallion would have taken a few daggers as well, but then he remembered: she had done just that, he was just the person carrying them.

Fighting a guardian in darkness didn't seem easy or particularly fair. If Dallion was going to succeed at the chance he had been given, he'd have to learn how to do that for two levels.

Light filled the chamber. It was dome shaped, with a perfectly round floor and no obscuring columns. The gate to the lower level was virtually a triangle stuck on the side opposite of the tunnel leading the group here. At first glance, there was no guardian to be seen.

Instinctively, Dallion looked up. There was nothing there, either.

A blue flame lit up in the center of the chamber. The vibrations were clear and powerful joy, but also sadness. Moments later, a yellow flame emerged as well, illuminating the entire area.

## **LEVEL 1 GUARDIAN**

**Species: Firebird**

**Class: Fire**

**Statistics: 100% HP**

Chapter 116: The Firebird

This was the first time Dallion had seen a firebird. He knew of their existence, both from his current memories and those from his Earth life. In all instances, he imagined it to be a large bird with flames for feathers that scorched everything that came near. The creature that filled the chamber utterly shattered those preconceptions. More owl than eagle or peacock, the creature represented one plump yellowy-reddish flame composed of thousands of smaller ones. However, they weren't so

much feathers, but droplets of fire that kept pouring down. It was as if someone had lit up a wax figure and then given it life.

Green eyes, larger than Dallions buckler, stared at the intruders, glistening bright green.

Dallion saw Janna and Kallans markers move from flame to flame, attempting to find a weak spot, yet there were none.

## **COMBAT INITIATED**

Janna squeezed the trigger of the crossbow. The bolts flew at their target, splintering moments before hitting the birds chest. The firebird exploded with a dull pop, engulfing a quarter of the chamber in flames, very much like a helium balloon set on fire. A wing of green markers emerged. Not expecting the blast, the siblings rushed back, hiding behind Kallans tower shield. Even Dallion felt the warm wave of air pass through him, causing him to take several steps back.

Was this what a real exploration mission was? No more simple guardians with limited powers, no more hints or easy victories, these creatures fought to win.

Kallan let go of his shield, leaving it to drop to the ground. While it had protected him from the initial expansion of the flame, it had become too hot to handle. Reaching out, he called another from Dallions back. Meanwhile, Janna readied her crossbow.

There was no trace of the fire owl. After the flame had burst, the only thing that remained were a few lingering flames on the floor, no larger than campfires. Before anyone could react, though, the flames trickled together, as if they were made of liquid, then erupted into a fiery fountain. Moments later, the giant burning owl was there again, fully restored.

Without hesitation, Janna aimed for the creatures head and shot another volley of bolts. This time the guardian shielded its body with a wing of flame. Another explosion followed, far smaller than the previous one. Droplets of flame rained down on the floor like beads, then trickled to the owl, up its leg, as they reformed the wing.

Dallions mind raced through options, trying to figure out a way to fight such a beast. The closest thing he had fought to this was the slime back in the awakening shrine near Dherma village. That too had proved impervious to slashing and piercing attacks, although back then Dallion didnt have the dartbow. If the logic held, the only way to defeat the firebird was to bash him with blunt weapons.

Looking at the white rectangle above the creature, not a single percent of health had decreased. In turn, Kallan had suffered another injury, reducing his health by another ten percent.

Use a shield to attack it! Dallion shouted.

His advice wasn't requested, though clearly welcomed, for Kallan spun around and threw the smaller shield he held at the guardian. A dull thump was heard as the shield smacked the side of the firebird's head, causing it to tilt slightly.

### **CRITICAL STRIKE!**

#### **Dealt damage was increased by 150%**

A large chunk of the owl's health was gone, along with its balance. Twenty percent with one strike was no joke, and everyone in the party knew it.

Not wasting a moment, Jenna threw her crossbow on the floor and summoned her bucklers. The two large metal disks appeared in her hands and were immediately hurled at the firebird's torso in an attempt to topple it over. A dull sound was heard, like a stick hitting a bag of flour and then nothing. Both shields had passed through the fiery body, barely doing any damage at all.

Now it's my turn, the guardian whispered. Or rather, Dallion thought he heard it whisper. Jenna and Kallan didn't seem to have reacted at all, standing in their positions expectantly.

Move back! he shouted. It's about to

Before he could finish, the owl spread its wings. The flames that composed them splattered sideways like thrown liquid, increasing their size threefold until they covered a third of the chamber, stretching along the walls. At this point, the siblings dashed towards Dallion. A massive green wave wall covered them, indicating where the guardian would strike and it did.

Both wings flapped closed like a huge flap, trapping everything between. A burst of flames rose to the area, then disappeared.

Both Jenna and Kallan had lost thirty percent of their health, reducing them to half. Meanwhile, the sparks of fire that covered the floor had already started trickling towards the firebird once more to restore its wings.

I'm joining in! Dallion dropped as many of their items as he could, reaching for his harpsword. Guild orders were one thing, but even a pack rat shouldn't allow his party to be wiped out.

Taking a deep breath, he concentrated on the guardian. Every single flame flickered a shade of blue, mirroring the overall emotion of the creature—it was happy that there was someone to fight, but sad that they would soon go. Quite an interesting and complex emotion, and if this weren't such a fierce battle, Dallion might have tried to offer a draw.

His thumb played the string ten times in rapid succession. One after another, ten blue markers emerged on the string, following one behind the other like a train. Now came the difficult part—Dallion had to match each and every one of them at exactly the right time, or nothing would happen.

Holding his breath, he played again.

*One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten!*

The firebird froze. Dallion had no time to rejoice, however. No sooner had he finished one series than the next one began. It was like playing a solo a very boring solo without the option of stopping. With his concentration and stamina he could probably manage another two sequences or three, but after that he'd be useless.

Are you okay? he shouted, unable even to look in the siblings' direction. I'll hold him as long as possible. Try bashing him in the meantime!

He kept on playing. The flames were vibrating in tandem with the strings. Thankfully, the siblings were in a condition to take advantage of the chance Dallion had offered.

Kallan reacted first, rushing to get the tower shield and wave it through the owl's legs. The obligatory thud was heard, at which another of the guardians' health decreased by another ten percent. And yet again, there was no critical strike.

Janna joined in, striking with the flat of one of her rather large blades. Despite her energy and enthusiasm, each strike only reduced the firebird's health by one percent. At this rate, Dallion would break the sequence long before they had depleted the guardians' health.

Dallion's fingers started to hurt. It began with a slight stinging, but quickly grew to the point that he felt they were burning. Another few seconds and he would have to stop. Gritting his teeth, he put in all his strength, trying to ignore the pain, but it did little good.

Why couldn't he figure this out? It was something simple, he just felt it! Almost as if it were on the tip of his tongue. Just a tiny bit more of concentration and he would

A note was played out of rhythm. The music instantly stopped, and with it the hold Dallion had on the creature. The joy coming from the guardian changed to amusement. Its eyes gleamed victorious, as it spread its wings again.

The eyes! he shouted. It's the eyes! They aren't of flame!

That explained why the firebird had shielded itself with its wing during the second attack. It was afraid of getting hit in the weak spot. That's why the shield hitting it on the side of the head had dealt more damage than everything else combined.

A single ranged marker appeared on the owl's eye. Then Kallan squeezed the trigger of the crossbow.

This was the moment of truth. The guardian had realized what they were planning to do. Knowing that simply closing his eyes wouldn't help against that many projectiles, he hurried to slap his wings shut to protect himself and possibly scorch the siblings in the process.

Everything was moving so fast that even with his mind at nine Dallion could hardly follow.



The flaming wings moved closer, attempting to close around the bolts with the speed of moving fire. The bolts, however, proved to be stronger. As they hit the creatures head, a series of thumping sounds filled the air, yet among them there was one more the sound of metal hitting stone, followed by a loud shattering of glass.

**FATAL HIT!**

**Dealt damage was increased by 500%**

Dallion covered his eyes with his elbow, bracing for the explosion that was to follow. Janna and Kallan also curled up on the floor, ready for the worst. Luckily for them, no blast followed. The flames that composed the firebird suddenly turned to smoke, evaporating towards the ceiling. It wasn't only the wings that had vanished; it was the entire guardian itself, disappearing like a blown-out candle. And to confirm their victory, the entire chamber lit up.

**KALEIDERVISTO Level 1 has been cleared!**

**Continue on to fulfill the KALEIDERVISTOs destiny.**

The familiar rectangle appeared.

I've never seen one of those before, Kallan said, nowhere as relieved. To him, this remained just a job. We'll have to tell dad about it.

Yeah. Janna nodded.

Shields and weapons were scattered all over the chamber like discarded towels. A few of them remained scorching hot after their contact with the firebird.

Shields are still hot, the girl noted.

This shouldn't have happened. They're supposed to return to normal once the guardian vanishes. Kallan summoned his tower shield. The moment it appeared in his hands, he quickly let it go again. We'll have to stay here a while, he said rubbing the palm of his hand in his shirt.

I'm fine with that, Dallion managed to say. I just need a few minutes rest.

You need more than that. Janna pointed at his hand the tips of his fingers were raw and bloody. You pushed yourself too hard.

It worked, though. Dallion forced a smile. Not sure I'll be able to pull it off for the next one.

We'll take care of it. Kallan quickly added. We've already gone through a fire guardian. It's unlikely there will be another.

Are you sure? There were two shadow guardians in the dagger.

It's rarely happened. The boy shrugged, changing his stance. If there are two fire guardians in three levels, it'll be really weird. The certainty was gone from his voice.

To be honest, Dallion wanted Kallan to be right. Facing another guardian like this, even after they had an idea regarding the weak spot, would be too much.

Anyway, lets just get our reward Dallion stood up and think it over afterwards.

Reward? Janna blinked. What reward?

The leveling up?

Theres no leveling up. This isnt a training dagger. Its an item, and items only increase skills when fully improved.

Dallion felt a chill down his spine. Still unwilling to believe it, he looked at the blue rectangle once more. There was no denying itthe rectangle didnt say anything about choosing a focus, nothing at all

Chapter 117: Mother-of-pearl

So much effort, all lost because of a level cap. Apparently, entering a sphere item didnt guarantee awakening. When people had said that the daggers were similar to the awakening shrines, thats exactly what they meantonly the daggers were similar to the awakened shrines. Other items, like the one Dallion was exploring now, werent. Upon that realization, Dallion for the first time felt as he was supposed to feelgrumpy, like being on a job.

Had enough rest? Kallan asked.

Almost, Dallion replied. The pain from his fingers had gone, but it didnt look like he was going to resort to music skills for the next two levels. What do you think is down there?

Darkness, the boy smirked. And monsters, he added.

Dallion could tell that he was being tested, or rather that he was being treated as a newbie. In itself that was good, it meant that Kallan had gone through his doubt and was starting to accept Dallion as one of them. Unfortunately, that came with the obligatory chores and talking down to. Dallion had been in enough games to know the experience, he also knew that the smartest thing to do was go with it in joking fashion.

Are the darkness and the monsters separate, or do they charge us at the same time? Dallion asked. As expected, his question attracted two very puzzled glances. Im just asking to know which side of the corridor to stand. Dont want to light up a monster by accident.

Janna stifled a chuckle, while Kallan narrowed his eyes.

Smart-aleck, the boy mumbled.

Seriously, though, what do you think is down there?

Depends on the item type. Some grow, others shrink, its never the same.

In what way?

Sometimes each next level is larger than the last. Sometimes its smaller, but the monsters are tougher. One time we went seven levels down and ended directly in the guardian chamber.

That sounded slightly ominous. By the sound of it, it sounded like the siblings had been part of a larger party. Clearing seven levels was no small feat. Hopefully, they had managed to kill the final guardian, or they would have had to go through every monster once more.

Are there any cases of the levels being the same size? Dallion asked.

Sometimes. Only when were dealing with weapons. Thats a way to tell that something might be a weapon.

The conversation came to an abrupt end. Dallion stood up from the floor and started picking up the shields and weapons. The lanterns were also returned to him. Only Janna decided to keep one of her bucklers on. The damage she had received in this fight had pretty much reduced her health by a third. If the one on the second level was twice as strong, that would leave her just enough to reach the final monster.

It took a while to reach the second level. If the entry chamber was any indication, it was of the growing type. The light that Dallion was carrying was barely strong enough to reach the walls of the chamber. Three tunnels continued on, one in each of the cardinal directions, the fourth being the way to the level above.

Which way? Dallion asked in a near perfect whisper.

Were not exploring the entire level, Kanna replied. There was a moments pause as both Janna and Dallion looked at him. Right, always head right.

How could you tell? Dallion squinted stared in the direction. The three tunnels seemed identical: pitch black and silent.

He always goes right, Janna explained. It works half of the time.

There was no denying the logic, so the group headed in that direction. One thing that became immediately apparent was the composition of the walls and floor: they were like mother-of-pearl. At first Dallion thought that it was only the entrance chamber that was different, but it soon turned out that everything was made of that material.

Unable to resist the temptation, Dallion moved closed to a wall and slid his fingers along it. The surface was smooth and yet pleasantly warm. Several things passed through his head. The first was whether he could improve an object to such a state. Apart from increasing its value, it would be stylish and pleasant to touch. The second thought was much less pleasant.

Have there been cases of sea monsters in sphere items? Dallion asked in a semi-casual manner.

Not in items, Janna replied, still looking straight ahead. Why?

I dont know, I thought that maybe the material the walls are made of might be a clue?

The girl glanced briefly over her shoulder, giving him a side glare. A moment longer and she would have no doubt said something biting and sarcastic, but events didnt let her. A faint squishy sound came from the distance.

Dallion braced himself. Seconds later, he regretted being right.

A giant octopus tentacle emerged from the darkness, heading straight for Dallion. There was no combat warning, no green markers, just a crimson biomass determined to squish him. Instinct made Dallion jump back. Fear tried to stop him in his tracks. In any other circumstances, he would have

grabbed a weapon and tried to fight off the tentacle, or at least make his capture difficult. Overburdened by a stack of weapons, shields and armor, removed that option. Dallions only hope was for the siblings to help out, yet for some reason none of them had attacked.

The tip of the tentacle smashed, lashed out at him, aimed at his right shoulder. The action was faster than estimated, ripping off the lantern and smashing it on the floor.

Dallion blinked. It took him a moment to realize what his eyes were seeing, and several more to notice that the remaining two lanterns were no longer on him, but held by Janna and Kallan further down the tunnel. The two had successfully moved near the wall, avoiding the sudden attack, then against all logic they turned out the lanterns they had summoned from Dallion. Moments later, the tentacle was heard slithering away.

For over ten seconds Dallion stood there, unwilling to do anything to attract the tentacles attention.

Its gone, Kallan said after a while. While there was no light, Dallions improved hearing gave him a good idea where the boy was. Were lucky.

Id say. Dallion took a step forward. The remains of the lantern crunched beneath his feet.

Were fighting a shelfey. Its very territorial, so it hates light and other creatures. That saves us some time.

Mind filling me in?

Shelfeys are full level guardians, Janna explained. They can only be found in sphere items. They are so big that their head fills up the entire guardian chamber, leaving the rest of their body to stretch about the level. For the most part, they just ignore people, but they really hate light.

And other creatures, Kallan explained. All explorers come across them sooner or later.

Dallion didnt say a word. Just when he thought he was getting used to this place, he came across something that would play basketball with his logic before throwing it in orbit. Ten minutes ago, he had fought an owl made of liquid fire, and now he was about to fight an elastic hermit octopus? There was so much about it that just didnt make sense.

If the guardian was so large, how had it appeared? Also, at that size, why would light annoy it, but not sound?

How do we fight it?

Fighting it is easy, just uncomfortable, Jenna said, moving further away in the darkness. All we have to do is reach the main chamber.

Sure. Why not? Dallion grumbled and followed.

Walking in pitch dark turned out to be simpler than he imagined. Even with all his senses increased, Dallion had kept relying on his sight to walk around. Since here there was no such option, he had to take a crash course in sightless navigation. It wasnt only the sound that helped him navigate, but also the sensation of air passing through the tunnels.

As it turned out, if the siblings were to be believed, the shelfey also had the properties of a giant sponge, as in that it grew with time up to the point of filling out the entire level. It was said that

there had been two such cases, requiring that the exploration party hack its way to the guardian chamber and kill it. This specimen hadn't grown nearly as much, but facing it was annoying nonetheless.

Every now and again, the group would reach a point that was completely blocked by a tentacle root or other biomass. In such cases, the crossbow was used to burst a hole through the obstacle. For once Dallion was glad there was no light for him to see what was actually going on. The slithering sound that followed, though, was enough to make him feel slightly queasy.

After a while, the party reached a part of the level where the draft was felt outright.

Stop, Janna whispered. We're near the mouth.

Stay near the wall, Kallan said. And better crouch.

What's the plan? Dallion asking.

After I shoot, it'll contract. At that point, turn on the lantern and rush towards the chamber. We only have a small window, so don't trip.

You're sure you've defeated these before? Dallion moved to the wall. Just to be on the safe side, he knelt down, positioning his left hand in such a way that the buckler would protect as much as possible.

Lots of times, Kellan whispered.

Three, Janna corrected. It'll be fine, though. Trust us.

Deal. Dallion didn't have a choice. As long as we explore the rest of the level once you've defeated it. Don't mess up and we will.

The moment of truth arrived. Dallion could hear the crossbow being prepped. The trigger clicked as four bolts were released. Dallion couldn't see the bolts, but the impact was difficult to miss, especially since it was followed by a roar that made the entire tunnel tremble. That was the sign. Quickly, Dallion lit up the lantern and rose to his feet. Janna had already thrown the crossbow to the ground and was running forward, followed by her brother. Dallion quickly did the same.

Given the squishy sounds that he had heard before the roar, Dallion expected the tunnel floor to be covered with blood and fleshy remains. To his surprise, there was nothing there. The mother-of-pearl floor was as spotless as it had ever been.

There was no time to be surprised, however. In the distance, some two hundred feet away, a crack had appeared in the darkness. At first it seemed like something a crackling might cause. As Dallion approached, though, he saw that it was completely different. The crack turned out from the entrance to the guardian chamber, almost completely blocked by a red blubbery matter.

Run through before it closes, Kallan shouted the obvious. And don't let go of the lantern!

## **LEVEL 2 GUARDIAN**

**Species: Shelfey**

**Class: Crippled Star**

**Statistics: 72% HP**

Droplets of sweat formed on Dallions forehead. There was no mistaking it the dog-like silhouette, the blackness, the ability to attack with anything and deform it, making it part of itself.

Dallion drew his dartbow. The only question on his mind was how to survive this encounter.

Chapter 118: Horror from the Past

Flashbacks of Dallions encounter with the chainling passed through his mind. That had been the first time he had gone into the wilderness, and the first time he had seen actual death. One thing about awakened battles was that despite the hardships and danger of having ones abilities sealed, they were still too much like a video game. Death wasnt real death, especially when emblems were involved. Fighting in the wilderness was just that. The hunting party Dallion was in had come across a whole caravan of corpses, not to mention lost a substantial number of soldiers when facing the beast. It was mostly through luck that Dallion hadnt joined them.

The creature that was in the chamber brought all those memories back, along with the corresponding fear. It appeared far smaller than the chainling Dallion had seen no bigger than a standard wolf semi-merged to the body of a much larger creature. If Dallion was to guess, hed say that the real guardian had attempted to fight the chainling and had lost. Chainlings, as Dallion had seen, had the ability to merge with and transform both living and non-living matter; thats what made them such a threat.

No wonder the shelfeys kept growing until they filled up the level the chainling compelled them to.

Janna and Kallan didnt seem in the least worried. Rather the opposite, they dashed at the black silhouette like hawks at a rat. A series of red walls zigzagged from their blades through the creature several times.

Seeing that it was outnumbered, the creature attempted to scurry towards the nearest wall, but it was already too late. Before it could take a step, Kellan had landed half a dozen hits. Moments later, he was joined by his sister.

Stacks of red rectangles emerged in the air, each indicating a five percent health reduction. It all seemed so effortless. Three passes were all it took for the wolf silhouette to go out of existence, as if it were a common item creature.

Dallion could barely believe what he had just seen. The nest of cracks had been tougher. Even he would have managed to defeat the guardian alone. For several seconds, he held his breath in disbelief that the battle had ended. A blue rectangle soon confirmed it.

**KALEIDERVISTO Level 2 has been cleared!**

**Continue on to fulfill the KALEIDERVISTOs destiny.**

The entire level lit up. There was no denying it now, the guardian had been destroyed and just as easily as Kallan had said. No question, they had been lucky, and yet something weighed on Dallions mind.

That was a shelfey? he asked.

Annoying creatures. Very easy to get rid of, though, the boy replied.

Was that how his grandfather had made one during the war? Possibly, it also meant why the Order of the Seven Moons considered the practice dangerous. The bigger question, though, was how had the creature entered the item in the first place. There had been a previous guardian that was plainly visible, and even so, the chainling had entered and gotten trapped inside. Or maybe it hadnt become trapped, but was just resting? Growing, perhaps? For all Dallion knew, maybe this was how they were bornthey would infect an item, and slowly mature inside until the moment they emerged in the real world again and started causing chaos. They were awakened creatures too, after all.

Whats wrong? Kallan asked.

Just thinking. Dallion tried to get the images out of his head. You say you meet these things often?

Just sometimes, Janna shrugged.

Would have been great if it was often. Kallan went to the chambers exit. The gate leading to the third level had disappeared, but it didnt look like he was interested in it for the moment. Exploring would be a lot faster.

And a lot more disgusting, his sister added.

True to their word, the siblings went with Dallion to explore the rest of the level. It was slightly bigger than the one above, suggesting that the next one would be larger still. To everyones disappointment, there was nothing but empty corridors to be found. All tunnels and chambers were in perfect condition, glowing in a warm white light now that the level had been cleared. Even Nox wasnt able to sense any cracks about. In all likelihood, the chainling had killed them off as well.

Kallan was a bit annoyed that no achievement appeared as a result of the exploration, although both he and Janna seemed to enjoy the relaxing of pace. To a degree, so did Dallion. After a while, the troubling thoughts of the chainling gave way to troubling thoughts of what might be expecting them on the last level. Going by established logic, the guardian there had to be the strongest of any so far. Just to be certain, Dallion inquired how likely it was to stumble upon another shelfey. So far there had been no such other instance.

The sweep over, the three descended to the last level. Dallion was quiet the entire way.

As expected, the entrance chamber was the largest of the ones so far. Made completely of blue crystal, held seven exits. Two of the connecting tunnels were full with slight tapping sounds, so it came as little surprise that one of them was chosen as a start of the final exploration. Apparently, when dealing with monsters, the siblings preferred to secure their backs in case they had to escape. Heading into battle straight on was one way to increase the odds of that happening.

The enemies were once again goblins, though this time there was more than one type. If the Cave Goblins were to be considered the basic sub-species, the Grey Goblins were definitely the clever agile ones. Unlike the rest of their kind, they were both fast and agile enough to defend against Kallan and Janna's zigzag attacks. Not only that, but they also landed an attack or two as well. It was only thanks to the siblings' synched fighting style that they managed to ultimately end up victorious. Looking at them in action only made Dallion see the difference between a group of individuals and a group, and that only made him want to pass his selection trial even more. Once he got a mentor, he could become part of a group, and not just as a simple packrat.

The third type of goblins were the Granite Goblins. As the name implied, they were large, massive, and extremely strong. Far less in number than any of the other types, they were as fierce as the well-guarded Dallion had fought back in his village. The siblings had probably faced them before, because they quickly changed their way of fighting.

Janna summoned her crossbow, then quickly proceeded to shoot indiscriminately further down the tunnel, time after time. The sound of blasts echoed, combined with the noise of shattering crystals. After the fifth shot, she tossed the weapon on the floor and summoned a pair of swords.

Meanwhile, her brother dashed forward armed, for the first time, with a pair of dartbows. Running at the edge of the darkness, he picked off the remaining goblins one by one. Only when the granite monster was alone, did the focus fall on it.

Seven feet tall, and with the consistency of a mountain, the creature had next to no emotions. The only blue spot was in its head, pulsing with anger and rage. If Dallion's fingers weren't so badly hurt, he could have tried to freeze it for a moment, although speed wasn't the issue here. While the goblin wasn't overly slow, it was nowhere as fast as the siblings. The real problem was the stone skin that covered it like a shell. Attacks, even those from a crossbow bolt, tended to bounce off, creating little more than a chip on the goblin's skin. There didn't seem to be any weak spots or other weaknesses it had. The only solution was persistence, striking as many times as needed to form a crack in its skin, then strike the final blow there.

On the whole the method was good, however, it was costly both in time and health. Neither Kallan nor Janna complained, but each Granite Goblin encounter reduced their health roughly by fifteen percent. By the time they had reached the guardian chamber, both were at less than a third of their original health. That did not bode well at all.

I take it we won't be exploring the whole of this level. Dallion tried to lighten the mood as the rest of his party had taken a short break at the chamber's entrance.

We won't have to. All creatures will be killed once the item's destiny is restored, Janna said. That goes for cracks as well.



Good to know. What happens then?

Then we leave and get paid.

And also get to have some guild food, Kallan added.

Right. I meant what happens with the artefact? Dallion clarified.

Oh, that. It goes to the crafters who determine what it does, then its kept or sold off. Usually sold off. Theres no point in keeping things just for the sake of them. Of course, everyone in the guild can buy them out before they hit the market. The captains have first choice, but after that anyone can bid. Even you.

That sounded like a nice perk. It also meant that the least equipped members could take advantage of the work of others. Granted, they had to have earned the funds to actually buy the item.

Even gotten anything good?

Yes. Kallan didnt go into details. Lets go.

To Dallions surprise, the siblings put the weapons they were carrying on his pack.

This is the last one, so once in the chamber, you can drop everything on the ground and join in, Janna said. Just dont get in the way. If you can pull off some music, do it, but otherwise wait till were done or killed and then have a go. It takes one of us to win for everyone to get paid.

Well still get paid for the first two levels, right?

Yeah, but the big money is for the fulfilling. Everyone can do a few levels. The trick is getting it all done.

There was no arguing that. Adjusting the gear he was carrying, Dallion then nodded.

The three entered the chamber slowly and cautiously. Kallan was first, followed by his sister a few steps later. Dallion was last, carrying all the lanterns with him. Light covered half of the chamber, but there was no guardian in sight.

Kallan made a sign for his sister to move along the right section of the chamber while he continued along the left. That left Dallion in the awkward position of having to continue straight forward. So much for playing it safe. Whatever the guardian was, chances were it would attack the light source in the middle of the chamber.

Do you feel anything, Nox? Dallion whispered. He could feel cracklings unease. Yea, I know what you mean.

A few hundred steps in, most of the chamber was lit up, and still there was no guardian to behold. Dallion glanced over his shoulder to the tunnel through which they had gotten here. It was barely visible.

Dallion removed one of the lanterns from him and put it on the floor. After a pause, he continued forward. Options raced through his mind. The first level had a firebird, the second remained a big unknownnot much information to speculate on. Looking at the structure of the levels, though, the second one was made entirely of mother-of-pearl, and which was of crystal. Assuming each level

was somehow an embodiment of its guardian, that would suggest that this guardian was linked to crystal?

Get back! Kallan shouted.

Chapter 119: Mirror Widow

A blade of air split the air, inches away from Dallions toes. If Kallans shout hadnt caused him to momentarily freeze, he would have received considerable damage, possibly even a fatal wound.

Instantly Dallion jumped back. A deep cut was visible on the crystal floor, several feet long. Whatever had caused it was sharp, long, and durable. Yet, why hadnt there been any combat rectangles or defense markers? And above all, where was the thing that had attacked?

Wheres it at? Dallion shouted, aiming forward with his dartbow. The chamber was as empty as before.

Kallan didnt respond, eyes darting from spot to spot throughout the chamber.

Dallion braced himself for further attacks, but none followed. Even so, he had no intention of taking the chance. Holding his breath, he squeezed the trigger. The bolt flew forward. Barely a few feet in flight, something slashed through it, slicing the projectile in two.

What

Mirror Widow! Janna shouted. Thats why we cant see it. Its covered in mirrors that make it invisible and act as a shield. Anything that approaches will be sliced.

Crap! Kallan cursed.

Hold on a sec. Jenna summoned her crossbow and shot at the center of the chamber some twenty feet in front of Dallion. A series of blasts filled the air, like flower balloons exploding, after which dust and particles calmly fell to the floor.

There was a long moment of silence.

Damn it! Kallan slammed the crystal wall with his hand. Why did it have to be a widow?!

Looks like theres nothing we can do, Janna said from the other side. Well have to call this off.

Why? Dallion asked. Whats the big deal with a widow?

Both siblings gave him a disapproving glance that couldn't be mistaken even in the dimness. Dallion knew that look well—his high-school geography teacher would give him that look whenever he asked something considered stupid.

I've never seen a Mirror Widow before, he explained calmly. What's it like? Like a spider?

No, not like a spider Kallan sighed audibly. It's like an armored beetle. It has a very thick shell, spikes on its legs, and wings that let it fly about.

And the shields?

Scale membrane. Whenever it senses something close, the widow's wings flash it, so that the guardian is protected.

The problem is the membrane. It's both invisible and hard as crystal. Even if we attack it from both sides, we won't deal much damage. The way Kallan said it suggested they had tried before and failed miserably.

Yeah, this is better left for the higher levels. We still got two levels done, though. That's something.

What if I can break the membrane? Dallion asked. What happens then?

You can't break the membrane. Kallan laughed.

Just imagine I do. What will happen?

Well Kallan took a few moments to become serious. If you break the membrane, which you can't, the creature's defenses will fall. The widow will wake up and will attack.

And we won't have to deal with the membrane again?

It's a one-time thing. Why? You're not actually thinking of trying it, right? There was a long pause. Right?

Hey, it's not like we have anything to lose. Dallion holstered his dartbow. If we quit or we go to zero health, there's no difference. Why not try something weird before quitting?

And here it was, the chance he was hoping to get. There were no guarantees that it would work, or that the party would survive even if it did, but Dallion was damned if he wasn't going to try something. As his father back on Earth had said, a person grows through failures. The important thing was to choose those failures.

Okay. Kallan said with some hesitation. So, what do we do?

The beetle has two wings, right? So, if you two keep attacking it, that would let me approach the membrane without being sliced up, right?

Kallan nodded.

Great. How long can you keep that up? A minute, two?

Half a minute at most, Janna replied.

It wasn't as much as Dallion had hoped for, but plenty of time for what he had in mind.

Okay, give me a minute to get ready. He took a deep breath. You up for this, Nox? he whispered.

In his awakening room, Dallion could feel the cub mew in excitement. Apparently, all the talk of pets and items becoming like their owner was true. Nox was turning out to be a reckless little crackling.

Remember, just a crack, don't go wild on me.

The following meow didn't fill him with much confidence. At the end of the day, cats will be cats.

Okay, start shooting! Dallion shouted.

Moments later, each of the siblings shot a barrage of bolts from both sides of the chamber. To the naked eye it seemed as if they were shooting at nothing, but each time a bolt or bolt fragment neared the center of the chamber, it would be reduced to bits.

Dallion drew his harpsisword and started walking forward. Soon he was half a step away from the place of his nearly fatal incident. Now was the time to see whether all that Kallan had said was true. Slowly, Dallion extended his sword forward, then pushed against the air. The tip of the blade past the crack on the floor. Shortly after, it stopped, as if hitting something solid.

So far, so good. Now the really tricky part began.

It's all you, Nox, he whispered, still pressing the sword against the invisible membrane. Go for it.

Not needing to be told twice, the crackling appeared in the darkness. Without hesitation, it leapt forward to the point at which the blade hit the membrane. The cub's claws sunk into the air, making it hang three feet above the floor. The sight would have been hilarious if it wasn't for the streams of bolts that were viciously sliced on both sides of the invisible guardian.

Dallion held his breath. Would the crackling be able to pull this off?

Moving into a comfortable position, Nox pulled out one of his paws from the membrane, then did the action that thousands of cat owners dread: it pressed against the surface, claws extended to the extreme, and moved his paw down. A sound that could only be described as a combination of cracking and tearing filled the air, distinctly audible above everything else. Then, moments later, a sliver of reality emerged.

Like a crack to another dimension, the sliver let Dallion see part of the action: Mirror Widow. It was, as the siblings had said, like a beetle, but not only that it was like a magnificent stag beetle, entirely made of mirrored crystal. If Dallion had a choice he would love to have such a creature as a familiar. Fighting it felt barbaric, the mere thought that he would have to shatter such delicate beauty made Dallion cringe inside. Sadly, there was no other option.

Get back, Nox, Dallion ordered. The crackling had done its part. Now it was time for Dallion to finish it.

A red path appeared in the air, guiding Dallion on how to strike to widen the crack. With a moment's hesitation, that's what he did.

Darude! Dallion shouted.

The harpsisword split the air, burying itself in the thin sliver. There was nothing elegant about it: just a barbaric hack chopping away at the invisible shell. The effects were immediate. The crack grew,

encompassing the entire area around the beetle like a spider-web. For several seconds it held strong, attempting to maintain its integrity before shattering like a chandelier in a Hollywood action movie. Shards of invisibility fell to the ground, finally revealing the guardian they were here to face.

Got you. Dallion smiled.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

The membrane gone, bolts rained on the beetle. Most bounced off the shell, like toothpicks, but a few managed to accidentally hit some of the unprotected spots where the shell pieces met.

### **LEVEL 3 GUARDIAN**

**Species: Mirror Widow**

**Class: Crystal**

**Statistics: 97% HP**

Get away from there! Janna shouted, while still shooting with the crossbow.

Dallion was only too happy to comply. Seeing the beetle in full was a lot more frightening than a partial glimpse. And the guardian didn't disappoint, leaping into flight. Annoyed to have been awakened from its slumber, it quickly went on the offensive.

Hearing the buzzing, Dallion jumped flat on his face, then continued in a crawl towards the nearest wall in the chamber. The siblings had a similar idea, crouching against the walls, shields in front.

For several seconds, they all stood there, waiting for something to happen. None of them had faced a Mirror Guardian before, so none knew what to expect.

The beetle made three circles around the chamber, carefully observing its attackers. For a moment it seemed as if the entire party was out of reach, forcing the guardian to fly about in search of an opening. Then, without warning, the creature suddenly darted at Dallion.

Green markers appeared everywhere as well as several lines indicating the Mirror Widows target of attack. The lines were too large for Dallion to escape them, so he did the next best thing: tried to block with his buckler. That proved to be completely inefficient.

Once the crystal insect was close enough, its wings slashed at Dallion. The buckler was slit in two upon contact as the wing continued on, slicing off Dallion's arm to the elbow.

### **SLICING WOUND**

**Health decreased by 40%**

**You are no longer able to make use of your LEFT ARM**

### **BUCKLER DESTROYED**

**You are no longer able to make use of your buckler**

Dallion! Kallan shouted. The voice seemed so far away that it felt like a dream.

Moments later a series of blasts followed, as the beetle was hit by a set of crossbow bolts. Dallion watched the guardians health drop by seventeen percent, then again by nine. At some other time, he might have even been impressed. Right now, though, he just stood there, motionless, his mind in a loop of panic.

Snap out of it! Janna yelled.

He was just on borrowed time now. There was nothing that he could do with one hand and no guard skills. Come to think of it, it was rather funny getting defeated by a crystal beetle wasn't how he imagined it. Although

*Now get a grip and fight!*

And that is exactly what Dallion did.

Chapter 120: Nox in Action

The Mirror Widow landed on the floor. Unable to gain an advantage in the air, the crystal beetle had resorted to true and tried methods using brute strength against a significantly smaller enemy. Opening its wing cases, it attacked Kallan with both wings, aiming to slice the shield and its owner to ribbons.

As Dallion had proved, shields were little match to the wings destructive force. A few seconds and Kallan's tower shield was gone. Unwilling to flee, the boy quickly summoned a second shield as the first one broke down, and used it to defend himself. The effect was the same. The wings sliced through the new shield like thread through butter. Even so, Kallan held on. Reaching out, he called for yet another shield.

The attempt at survival seemed almost pathetic. It was obvious to all that no armor would save him. All that it managed to do was enrage the guardian further. Using his music vision, Dallion could see

the pulsating blue anger grow. If the creature had planned to let Kallan off with an arm missing, now it wanted to slice him up from head to toe.

Suddenly, a weak spot marker appeared on the back of the guardian. Half a dozen more followed, then a dozen more still. Time seemed to freeze.

His hand moved up, targeting a spot just at the base of the wing. Dallion then squeezed the trigger. Simultaneously, the entire back of the guardian exploded as a storm of bolts struck their target. Stacks of red rectangles appeared with wounds ranging from minor to mild. Unfortunately, each only took a few percent of health. Even after that entire attack, the Mirror Widow was above half health. The good news was that its flying capacity had been destroyed.

Technically, the rectangle read that the penalty would last for five minutes, but given how fast combat was going, five minutes might well be a thousand years. In that amount of time, Dallions party would have either defeated the guardian or been completely wiped out.

Emitting a grating clicking noise, the beetle stopped its attack on Kallan, pulling away so as to defend itself. The shell-like will cases closed up, covering the weak spots and what was left of the wings. From here on, it wasnt going to be as easy as before. The question was, what to do now.

Nox, are you up for another go? Dallion asked.

No surprise the crackling mewed from his awakening room.

Its not going to be an easy one, buddy. You might get hurt. Dallion knew precious little about familiars in this world. However, he had seen that Nox could appear and disappear at a moments notice. At least in that sense he didnt have to worry about the cub getting seriously hurt. Was he up for this, though?

In order to achieve what he was planning, Dallion would have to find a way to the guardians wing casings, then have Nox make a crack in one of them. It was certain that the cat wouldnt be able to break the wing like it had the protective membrane, however, maybe it could chip the armor just enough for Dallion, or someone else, to finish the job.

Go for the legs! Jenna shouted, while shooting another set of bolts at the guardian.

Dallion wasn't sure whether she was addressing him or her brother, so he fired a bolt at the creature's leg just the same. Moments later, Kallan slashed at the beetle's front legs with a massive broadsword. The weapon hit its target, then suddenly stopped in place. Despite the loud sound that filled the chamber, not even a single crack was visible on the Mirror Widows leg. Dallion's bolt didn't fare much better, bouncing off its respecting target without effect.

No luck! Kallan made a side jump, then ran on the chamber wall, away from the guardian.

Maybe it was all the martial art movies he had watched on Earth, or maybe he had become too used to the awakened realms, but the wall run didn't impress him overly. All he could think about when looking at it was slight envy that he hadn't learned to do that. From what it seemed, there were no bad awakened skills, it was all on how they were used. Even those considered common skills allowed incredible feats, and the best part was the more a person had, the more combinations there were.

With one brisk action, the guardian turned around, aiming to attack Janna. The girl was expecting that and shot the next set of bolts right at its head.

### **CRITICAL WOUND!**

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

A red rectangle appeared. Sadly, despite the hit, the creature's health only decreased by ten more percent, leaving it at forty-four.

Before Janna could shoot again, the beetle attacked with its mandibles, forcing her to let go of the crossbow and leap away to safety.

Can you keep it distracted? Dallion threw his dartbow away. Just five seconds.

Are you planning something reckless?

Nah, nothing that grand. Dallion smiled. Just a repeat of what we did before. Unless you have better ideas?

There was a brief moment of silence, but Dallion knew that he had already won the argument. The siblings had some reservations, but they also wanted to clear the level. After all, a job was a job, and sometimes one had to take risks. In this case, someone was going to be Dallion.

I need to reach its back, Dallion said. Can you pin it down for that long?

Pin it? Janna grinned. Yeah, I think I can do that. She reached out in the air and grabbed her crossbow.

Five seconds, Kallan said. Not one more.



Now! Kallan shouted and sped towards the guardian head on.

A split-second later Janna did the same, rushing along the wall, then up, so as to target the guardian from above.

In his mind, Dallion could see the attack unfold. Kallan was going to take a swing at the Mirror Widows head, while his sister would try to pin it in place. Even if she couldn't do much damage, the weight of the attack would make it difficult for the guardian to move for a bit. Of course, that made Dallion's job all the more difficult. Then again, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

Darude! Dallion shouted, and rushed forward.

The Guardian reacted as expected, choosing to face Kallan first. While it could sense the others attacks, it was only its head that it perceived to be in serious danger.

Metal hit mandible, filling the air with a sound similar to a bells ring. From this moment, the countdown was on.

Four.

Janna leapt off the walls and shot at the guardian from above. Bolts flew down, splitting into fragments like a deadly rain.

Three.

Dallion gritted his teeth, running as fast as his body would allow him. Nox had already appeared on his shoulder, ready to leap onto the guardians wing case the moment they got close.

Two.

The rain of bolts hit their target, pushing the crystal beetle towards the floor. One injured Kallan, reducing his health by ten. Thankfully, the armor and body level were high enough to prevent further damage.

One.

Dallion drew his harpsisword. He was two steps from the guardian, making his way through the crystal dust caused by Jannas attack. That proved to be enough for Nox, who jumped off his shoulder and right on the beetles wing case.

One.

The crackling clawed a thin line on the crystal surface, little more than a scratch on glass. It was impressive how it managed to do damage where massive weapons couldn't. It too had grown a lot from the little cubling Dallion had found at the top of the well realms mountain.

Zero.

*I want to attack.*

A series of red lines appeared. Holding his breath, he swung at the crack with as much strength as his single arm would allow him. A loud crack resonated throughout the chamber. The harpsiswords blade hit the crack straight center.

Dallion felt as if time stretched to infinity. As he looked at the point of impact, nothing seemed to happen. Had he failed? For what seemed like minutes he stared on, pondering the question, as memories of past fights ran through his brain. Then the crack began to grow. Like a tear in nylon, it extended on and on and on, until the entire wing case fell off, revealing the weakened area beneath.

Janna, hes all yours! Dallion shouted. Just

**FATAL WOUND!**

**Your health has been decreased by 75%**

Well, that was dumb. Dallion wanted to laugh. All that planning and he had forgotten something so obvious. No matter, next time hed know. Next time, things would be different. Next time

The chamber disappeared, as Dallion was spit out of the items realm and back into the Icepickers guildhall. His immediate reaction was to jump up from the bed. That proved to be a mistake. Unable to control its momentum, his body moved up, then back down on the floor with a plop.

Argh! Dallion managed to groan, his face to the floor. This definitely wasnt the way he expected his first exploration mission to end. Not only had he failed to win the prize, but had also ended up in a humiliating position on the floor. There was no way anyone would let this go.

Nice move, Kallan said in a snarky voice from above. This was exactly what Dallion had dreaded. Show it again next time. Ill bring friends to watch.

Ha, ha, Very funny. Dallion pushed himself up. His first reaction was to look at his left arm, just to make sure it was there. To his relief, it was.

Good trick with the wing, Janna said. Pity it didnt work out.

Oh, well. Dallion brushed the dirt off his shirt. You win some, you lose some. I guess we still get paid for two levels?

We actually cleared the third level, Janna added with a confident smile. Full artifact fulfillment. It was rather neat. I hadnt seen one like that before.

What are you talking about? Kallan crossed his arms. This is a group job. Dont you know anything?

Apparently not. As much as Dallion tried to keep a calm facade, on the inside, he was dancing.

As long as the job gets done, all of us get paid. We even get to buy out the item, if we want.

Dallion looked at it. No question, the item had changed, becoming a sort of sparkly vase-like device. All metal elements were gone, replaced by mother-of-pearl and crystal. In any other circumstances Dallion would have been beyond curious about it, but right now he wanted to stay as far away as possible from the thing.

Cool. Dallion took his harpsisword from the side of the bed and cautiously went towards the door. Maybe some other time, though. And now we get paid? He turned to Kallan.

No. The boy smiled. Now we eat. We get paid after.