

Leveling up 121

Chapter 121: Celebratory Feast

The difference between success and failure was like day and night. In his mind, Dallion considered both his sphere item experiences to be the same. In both instances he had failed to reach the point he should have, while those accompanying him hadn't. In terms of the guilds reaction, though

The moment Dallion left the exploration room, he was grabbed by the hand by Janna and dragged down to the eating garden. There, she had made a point to tell everyone how he had finished, had completed his first exploration job, and done so successfully. Even Kallan had joined in, adding that the achievement that Dallion had helped them accomplish.

There was a round of cheers, some clapping, and a lot of people raising their mugs and glasses in his direction. At that point, Dallion expected things to calm down. After all, everyone had their own jobs to celebrate or worry about; and as Vend had correctly pointed out, the interest in Dallion had largely decreased after his selection failure. As it turned out, he was completely wrong.

First, the waiter giant came to Dallions table with a large dish that no one had asked for. As Dallion had found out, the man referred to as Grunt by everyone had been part of the guild for over twenty real-life years. No one knew details about his skills or level, or even how he fit within guild hierarchy. As far as everyone was concerned, he was the one constantly bringing food.

With a smile and a tap on the back, Grunt congratulated Dallion before taking the siblings food requests. Barely had the giant vanished when Estezol emerged from somewhere and sat at Dallions table and began a never-ending complementing session. Based on the brief conversations between Estezol and the siblings in-between the bearded mans praise it became clear that was a frequent occurrence each time a job was completed with flying colors. The guild seemed to work very much like a corporation of sorts the people who assigned jobs to teams also were evaluated on the ratio of successful and unsuccessful jobs. Stacking up job failures was just as bad for the job assigner as it was for the guild members who failed.

Ten minutes in, captain Adzorg also joined them. Using the lunch break as an excuse he provided a semi-compliment about a job well done, while not forgetting to share his opinion that such a success wouldn't be likely if it wasn't for the advice and information Dallion had received from his echo. Not wanting to get into trouble with a captain, Dallion wholeheartedly agreed.

Another five minutes later, Vend also pulled up a chair, and started chatting up the siblings about Dallions performance. While a lot of jokes there were made, some of which Dallion would have preferred not to have been shared, Kallan and Janna also pointed out his help in the fight against the Mirror Widow. Clearly, breaking the wing case had proven to be the key to victory, leaving the creature vulnerable to ranged attacks.

One by one more and more members joined in, moving their chairs from other tables to join in the conversation, until everything became one giant party. Food and drinks came and went in abundance, all of them made in such a way as to be enjoyed by the awakened.

Dallion was talking to people he didn't know, often that he'd never met, as if they were close friends, listening to stories about their first exploration hunt, providing hints on how to act in the caves, even a few suggestions on how to combine skills.

Then, about two hours since Dallion had sat down at the table, March joined in as well. Her presence was immediately noticed. Several people quickly moved aside, forming a path for her to pass. A chair was emptied, its occupant preferring to stand in these circumstances. March acknowledged the gesture with a brief nod, then sat down.

This was the second time Dallion had seen her, and he had to admit that she was the type of person who looked more impressive without armor. A mixture of scars, brands, and tattoos covered most of her right arm, telling a story of their own.

So, you almost survived your first exploration, March said, stressing on the almost part. Any thoughts?

I have a lot to learn? Dallion ventured. It would have been easy to leave it at that, but something told him this wasn't the answer March was looking for. Also, it wasn't Dallion's nature. I want to go on more explorations, but not as a packrat.

You think you have skills to offer?

Dallion wanted to say yes. Given his track record so far, that might come as a bit arrogant, but then again, this was no time to be meek. This was a rare chance he had been given, and if he didn't take advantage there was no telling when it would occur again.

Not yet, but I will. Dallion smiled. I need a bit of practice and guidance, which I'll get faster if I take part in the action. That said, I should at least pass my selection trial. After that, though.

Covering all your bases, March mused. Vend, your thoughts?

He has the potential and the cockiness, the man replied. It's worth the shot. Today's mission proves it.

It proves he has the cockiness, but not the judgement. When I said you had the ability to learn, I didn't mean it would be fast. The woman turned to Dallion. Everyone in the guild has more experience in using their powers than you. Don't forget that, nor let it go to your head. At the end of the day, your skills will take you where you need to go. If you fail to achieve what you wish for, it's because one skill or another isn't at the adequate level.

The phrase sounded very philosophical. To be honest, Dallion didn't know whether the statement was deep, or March had just denied his request in polite fashion. Either way, all he could do at this point was nod.

Or you can give him to me, Adzorg said. If he's such a burden, maybe I will have better luck.

Don't you have enough on your plate, Nitiello? March frowned. You convinced the guild master that all the training artefacts require remodeling.

Which I am in the process of doing. The old man crossed his arms. One can work while also doing nothing.

I'm sure. She stood up. The boy already has an arrangement with Vend. If that falls through, you're free to do whatever you like. Something tells me, though, that if that happens, you'll quickly lose interest as well.

The old man didn't answer. The two guild captains stared at one another in silence for over ten seconds, then March turned around and left. That marked the end of the celebration. The mood

ruined, most of the gathered guild members returned to their tables or left the garden altogether. In less than a minute, the area contained only a small fraction of the people it had before.

Those two are always at each others throats, Janna whispered. Dont worry about it too much.

March is right about one thing, though, Kallan added. Captain Adzorg only wants you because March showed interest. The last time hed shown interest in anyone in the guild was years ago. Whats your arrangement with Vend?

Oh, its nothing much, Dallion lied, trying to dismiss the claim. One look at their curious expressions told him, it wouldnt work. I asked him to save me the dagger for the next selection trial. That must have impressed him, because he said hell become my mentor if I fulfilled the daggers destiny alone.

Alone? Kallan arched his brows. Thats

Its not that difficult, Janna countered. We do it every week.

Hes not us. He couldnt pass the fourth level on his own. What do you think will happen at the final guardian?

Hey, its not that bad. Dallion felt he had to say something. A few weeks of training and Ill get the hang of it.

It doesnt work that way Youll never succeed while youre capped. Not with the skills you have.

ITEM AWAKENING

Was wondering when youd show up, the echo said in greeting. Quite the commotion you stirred again. Oh, and congratulations for completing a guild job.

Thank you, Nil. That was surprisingly polite.

And for almost surviving the final guardian.

Dallion shook his head. He should have known it was too much to hope for a day free of sarcasm.

I take it you have a few questions to ask me?

Just a few. Dallion scratched the side of his ear. The level cap. Whats its purpose?

The cap has no purpose. The echo snorted. It just prevents you from learning more. I guess you can call that a purpose in the same way you can say that the purpose of age is to make you feel old.

An interesting comparison, but Dallion knew it to be a lie. There was always a reason for limitations in games, and from what he had seen so far, this was no exception. The five-level trial was there to ensure that only people who could handle the concept of echoes were allowed to make them; furthermore, it also ensured that those wanting to awaken an area on their own had the strength to survive. Having all skills and attributes capped at ten had to be done for some reason as well.

I suppose you wont tell me what happens when I become a double digit either? Dallion tilted his head.

The echos behavior instantly changed. Mocking was replaced by deadly seriousness.

No, I wont. That is for you to discover, when and if you pass your barrier. I can tell you something else, though. The way you are going, you have every chance of becoming a double digit before the next selection trial. Nil allowed himself a faint smile. That is, if you dont forget how much learning you have to do until then. Becoming a better awakened is not measured only through combat, theres a lot of learning involved as well.

Yeah, I figured that out. Practice, learning, and cheats.

You put too much stock in the gorgon, Nil scoffed. Anything else, youre curious about?

How much of the siblings skills can I learn?

The smile on the old echos face widened.

Youre finally asking the right questions. In one wordnone. This isnt a matter of missing the basics. Most of their combat actions rely on skills you dont have. As for the rest, there is a major difference of what a skill at ten provides, and what it offers afterwards. The cap is not just a number, as you will hopefully find out. And as unfortunate as it is, for the immediate future the only thing you could do about it is read and save up. This is one of the dangerous periods of an awakened's development. You are lucky, you havent spent a full day suffering the effects of your limitation. Some have remained at the double-digit barrier for years or even decades there, unable to progress forward or not allowed.

A cold shiver passed through Dallion. He remembered how annoyed he used to get when hed fight game mobs and get only a fraction of the experience needed for the characters next level. Just hours ago, Dallion felt cheated for not getting anything after defeating a difficult guardian. Living like this for years that must have been torture. Falkner was like that. He had made it a point to say that he was level ten at everything. How long had he remained there?

Dont feel glum, though. You have a good chance of pulling through. If you didnt have so much potential, would captains be fighting over you?

I guess not. Then again, Dallion had no idea what captains usually fought over. Thanks, Nil. Ill go get paid and finish this talk when Im back at the inn.

Not a bad decision. Be sure to count the money, by the way. Estezol can be trusted, but hes really not that good at counting.

Ill keep that in mind, Dallion laughed.

Oh, and one last thing. It wasnt because March had an interest in you. You have a real spark, Dallion, and as long as you dont lose it, youll get far.

Chapter 122: Shield Search

The money from the guild job was considerably more than what Dallion earned at the inn. Back in Dherma village, the amount would have been considered impressive, verging on unimaginable. Here, Dallion could live a comfortable life unless he wanted to get any awakened goods or gear.

Then, it became a whole different matter. For starters, his current resources weren't enough for a simple buckler.

After his lunch shift, Dallion had spent several hours going about the city in search of awakened armorers. Those that he found had all their product prices in gold coins. Dallion would have to take out a loan if he were to buy anything remotely adequate, and from the brief conversation he'd had with Hannah, taking out loans was generally a bad idea. Some things seemed to be the same no matter the world.

The more Dallion learned about the economy of the city, the more he saw how incredibly lucky he had been so far. It would have taken him months of saving at the very least to buy a dartbow, and as for the harpissword given that it was a level three item, it was starting to look like he wouldn't be able to afford it in a lifetime. A hint of guilt still lingered on in Dallion's mind as to how he had obtained it, but it was fading away by the day.

Natural born awakened sure had it tough, unless they were born in a family of means. If it hadn't been for the awakened shrine, Dallion would likely have remained a level one, spending the rest of his life mending small objects or improving an item per day. It would have taken him years to afford a shrine trial at the current prices. That explained why his grandfather had been so eager to join the army all those years ago—that was one certain method to get ahead. That or becoming an indentured awakened. From what Dallion had heard, there were quite a lot of those in the city, indebted to nobles or people of means. Of course, there was one other way as well, although Nil had been vehemently opposed to even discussing it: the Order of the Seven Moons.

Similar to the monasteries in the wilderness, the Order had shrines and sanctums in most cities, even beyond the borders of the empire. Due to pressure from the nobles, the shrines had been opened to the public, allowing anyone with the means to undergo a trial. In contrast, the sanctums were reserved to members of the Order. That only made Dallion more curious as to their nature. At some point, he was definitely going to visit, but that time wasn't now.

What about this one? Dallion pointed to a small buckler the size of a teacup. This was the fifth awakened armorer he had gone to.

Seven, the man replied, with as little as a glance at the item. Could bring it down to six.

Seven gold coins. That was still fifty percent more than what Dallion had.

Any chance I can split the pay? Like two golds per month for three months?

Nope. The man didn't even bother bargaining.

Three gold per month? Dallion offered.

Six gold, the armorer said, annoyed. Take it or leave it.

That was a bit harsh. Then again, the man was probably used to dealing with low income awakened. The sign above his shop clearly said Cheapest gear in Nerosal and judging by the quality of the items it had to be.

It's really not worth it, a familiar voice said from the shop's entrance. Turning around, Dallion saw Arthurows standing there with a grin on his face. It had been a few days since the two hadn't seen each other. In awakened time, weeks had gone by.

Unlike the last time Dallion had seen him, Arthurows was dressed much better, the personalized guild emblem hanging prominently from his neck. With a confident smile, he entered the shop and walked up to Dallion.

For one thing, its only decorative, Arthurows said.

Dallions eyes widened with surprise.

Performers use it during dance routines. Its pretty high end, Ill give you that. Arthurows took the buckler and turned it around. A series of small cracks and chips were visible here and there. Or had been at some point. Either way, its useless in actual combat.

The shopkeeper didnt even bother to grunt, directing his attention elsewhere.

Hey, Arthurows, Dallion said, trying his best to maintain a smile on his face. Shopping?

Actually, I came to find you. Arthurows put the buckler back in its place. I heard you completed a job at the guild, so though you might go off and spend it all on equipment. A personal piece of advice, dont bother with second hand gear. Its hardly worth the bother, especially since you never know how easy itll break.

I thought it could be mended.

Good luck mending special materials, Arthurows laughed. If youre capable of that you wont have any trouble getting armor for free. Any radiant will kill to have someone like that on staff. You might even get snatched by one of the nobles.

That made sense. If the material was too difficult to be achieved through improving, it stood to logic that it would be equally difficult to mend.

Still, if youre set on getting a shield from here, take your pick. Itll be on me.

On you? Dallion couldnt but feel suspicious. The entire time during the selection trial, Arthurows had done nothing but slack off, leaving everyone else to do the heavy lifting. He seemed like that sort of person who went through life taking advantage of opportunities and having an angle in anything he did.

You carried me all the way through the trial. Arthurows tapped his emblem with a finger. Got me a mentor, access to better jobs, its natural Id want to pay back the favor. And make no mistake, its thanks to you that the rest of us got our mentors. The rest were good solo, but if it wasnt for you, the group would have been swept away before the first guardian.

There was no denying that. Even so, Dallion felt good hearing it from someone else. It was a pity that it had to be the slacker of the party.

One shield in particular drew Dallions attention. Large and perfectly round, it had an extremely sharp edge, which was ideal for slicing attacks.

Not a bad choice, Arthurows said, following Dallions glance. Its not good for you, though. You need to have athletics to throw that at a target.

Damn! Athletic skills again.

No worries, Dallion lied. Im fine. Was thinking about the buckler, but since its decorative In truth, being reminded of his limitations had soured his mood to the point he didnt want to look at things to buy anymore.

I know what you mean. Second hand is no joke when youre starting out, but once youre set up, you cant give that stuff away. The nasty thing is that most of the special weapons cant be reforged, so you either have to spend a bag of coins on getting it fixed, or an even greater bag of coins on someone mending it. Theres one more option, though.

Oh? Curiosity made Dallion react on instinct.

You can rent equipment.

Renting. So simple, and yet Dallion hadnt thought of that maybe because none of the shopkeepers so far had agreed to anything other than a direct purchase.

How?

There are a few places. Arthurows became suspiciously vague. Most require a large deposit. You can always use guild equipment. Its cheap, but its crap in battle. If you really want to get your hands on something good, you have to become a member. There was a slight glint in Arthurows eyes. Interested?

So, this was the angle. Now Arthurows behavior suddenly made much more sense. Even without knowing anything about this worlds economic system, Dallion could see that his guild mate was involved in some kind of scam. If Dallion was to guess it was going to be something along the lines of every member can use the items of every other member. Thus Dallion was going to be free to use a shield of his choosing, but in exchange would have to surrender his harpsisword to the club. Likely at a later point some unexpected incident would happen, resulting in a lot of club items disappearing, among which Dallions harpsisword.

Definitely, Dallion smiled. While he had no intention of joining such a club, he was extremely curious about seeing it. Okay if we go there now?

You dont waste time, do you? Arthurows shook his head. Sure. Lets go.

Dallions hunch turned out to be correct. After ten minutes of walking, they had already entered what passed as a less reputable area of the city. Unlike earth, the cities in this world were made to look magnificent a citys level was an indication of its power, so filthy alleyways and decaying buildings were quickly mended and improved. The people living there, though, were a different matter. Closed doors and shuttered windows were a clear sign that the people of the neighborhood were hiding from the outside world; the lack of shops and overabundant of low-grade taverns, though rarely inns, was an indication that no one wanted to take the risk of opening a serious business here, relying on the lowest vices instead.

Drunkards end, Arthurows whispered as they walked. Not a place Id suggest you go to. However, its the fastest shortcut.

The club isn't here? Dallion asked, genuinely surprised.

You'd have to be crazy to do business here. Even the alcohols watered down. Don't worry, though, we'll be fine. People know better than to attack an awakened, especially if there's more than us.

That much was true. Dallion could hear the whispers of the locals as he walked on. There was fear in their voices, sometimes mixed with hatred.

How did people end up here?

Depends. Gambling debts, war orphans, people with skills that can't match up to an awakened. Some came to the city in the hopes of getting lucky. Unless you're an awakened, nine out of ten times you'll end up here. And of course, there are also those who take advantage of people in misery, Arthurows almost spat out the words. Although it was a whisper, for Dallion, it sounded like a shout.

And the city does nothing?

Arthurows glanced at Dallion for a few seconds, then faced forward again.

Sometimes I forget you came from outside, he sighed. The cities are only good for the awakened and those with money. Being born with good skills doesn't cut it. Unless you have exceptional skills and in an area that the awakened don't want to touch, life is tough. Take you. You've been here for a week and already you have a place to stay, food, guild membership, and enough money that would survive this entire neighborhood for a week. Do you think anyone else can march in a tavern and get a job off the bat? No. The only thing the city does is give them enough food to keep them dressed and alive. Sometimes not even that much.

What about the Order?

The Order's not as generous as they claim to be. There was hatred there. It lasted only for a moment, but thanks to Dallion's frequent use of his music skills in the awakened realms, he was able to spot it. The only way to get out of here is to be lucky enough and have a child that awakens early. That and

Why hello, there, a voice said a few steps away.

A group of five people had gathered on the road, blocking Arthurows and Dallion's path.

Nice day, isn't it? The only thing that would make it nicer is a charitable donation to all the less fortunate in the neighborhood, the leader of the group said a large man with, dressed in worn down adventurer clothes. Lucky that such generous people happened to pass by. The man grinned.

Five against two awakened? Dallion was just about to make an offhand comment when he suddenly stopped. A silvery glint on the man's neck caught his attention. That wasn't just a random piece of jewelry, it was a chain of sky silver, which meant that despite their looks this band of people weren't common thugs they were awakened, fully awakened at that.

Chapter 123: Scuffle at Drunkard's End

Dallion had gotten in a number of fights, mostly back on Earth. However, he had never been mugged before. He knew friends who had been, and from what they had told him, it was very much unlike what was depicted in shows and comics. The only talk that had taken place was after they'd

received a few punches in the face and stomach a hint of things to come should they cause any trouble. Compared to that, all this seemed fake, almost rehearsed.

What's the matter? Too good to share a few coins with the less fortunate? the band leader asked. His greasy brown hair almost glistened under the rays of the sun. The rest were no different. The epitome of riffraff, they had already drawn their weapons swords, daggers, as well as a massive nine-foot chain.

You're not fooling anyone, Arthurows said. Don't pretend to be from here. Get lost before you get into some serious trouble.

The guildy can talk the talk, another of the thugs snorted. Think that emblem will save you?

From you? Arthurows laughed. Come on. He opened his arms, inviting them to attack.

There's five of them, Dallion whispered. Strangely enough, he didn't seem particularly worried, either. For one thing, they seemed much less threatening than a chainling.

Just stay back and don't worry about it.

Last chance, the leader said. It was obvious he didn't want to fight, but things had escalated to the point that he had no other choice. Whichever your guild, well be long gone before they show up.

Arthurows response was immediate, darting forward faster than the human eye could see. However, he wasn't the only one. His enemies were also awakened and charged forward just as fast. Only Dallion hesitated a few seconds before joining in.

His right hand reached for his dartbow, only to realize that it wasn't in an easily accessible place. On second thought, that could have been a blessing in disguise in the real world the dartbow had no bolts to shoot with.

Thinking of the techniques used recently, Dallion decided to go for a defense attack. He kept running forward, almost until the point of contact, then twisted his body, taking a few sidesteps in the process. The action felt natural, despite the lack of markers.

Finishing off the imaginary sequence, Dallion then spun around and leapt towards the back of the ex-attacker. One strike at the back of the head and the man fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

In the time it had taken Dallion to knock out one of them, Arthurows had dealt with three. All that remained was the leader. Clearly more competent than his crew, the thug managed to evade almost as many attacks as Arthurows did. Watching the battle was mesmerizing for those who could keep

up. The closest thing Dallion had seen to this was combat scenes in old kung fu movies, only less flashy. Thinking about it, breakdancing was a better example. There was an unspoken choreography involved, and the one who didnt keep it got punished by a punch in the face or a knee in the stomach.

Dallion ran to one of the unconscious bodies and grabbed the chain from the persons hands. Judging by the distance between him and the fighting duo, he then swung it in the air above his head.

Protect the echo! Dallion shouted, and released the chain forward.

The phrase received exactly the reaction he was hoping for. Aware of what that meant, Arthurows broke off his attack and jumped back. The thug leader, on the other hand, turned around to determine what was going on, only to receive a rather hasty smack in the head. A few seconds later, it was all over. Five unconscious would-be-muggers lay on the ground, while Dallion and Arthurows hadnt even broken a sweat.

That was easy. Dallion fought to counter the effect of adrenaline pumping through his veins. The victory had whetted his appetite, wanting to continue with the battle. Think there are more? he asked with a note of hope.

Nah. Arthurows brushed off his clothes.

Who do you think they are? Thieves? Members of a rival guild?

Drifters, Arthurows replied with disgust. Probably not even registered.

You sure? I was told that there are underground awakened who pickpockets and

These arent them. If they were any good, they would have chosen a better neighborhood. Only cowards and the desperate come here to mug someone. Theres no guard fort nearby, and no awakened, so they thought they could stay low for a bit. I still cant believe they attacked us. They should have known they cant win.

What do you mean?

Half of them were not even fully awakened. Even the boss was a level six, or seven at most. From the way he fought Id say he stacked everything on reflexes.

Not all of them were fully awakened? Dallion hadnt felt that. Clearly, he had a lot more to learn as well.

So, what do we do now? Wait for the city guard to show up?

Why bother? Just leave them here and move on. When they come to, theyll leave the city, anyway. Meanwhile, the less fortunate could pick a few coins from them.

There was some poetic justice in that. Despite the nagging feeling of guilt, Dallion decided to go with Arthurows and continue on. For the first minute or so, he would look back every now and again to see what had happened. After a while, he stopped. Whatever was, was.

Youre pretty good in real life combat as well, Arthurows said all of a sudden. Most arent.

Thanks.

Try to avoid it. You're an Icepicker now. All your fighting must be within items, not outside. Besides, you never know who you'll stumble upon. There was a slight pause. These were drifter scum, but there are really dangerous people out there.

Nothing more was said on the matter, but Dallion got the hint. As everywhere else, this city too had its underworld, even if it wasn't apparent.

Drunkards end continued on for another half hour, right up to one of the city forests. At first Dallion thought they would go through, but instead, Arthurows turned left, continuing ten more minutes before ending in what seemed a rather high-class neighborhood. The houses were slightly smaller here, but meticulously kept, and at larger distances from one another. According to a quick consultation with Dallion's library echo, the neighborhood used to be a patch of military field tents decades ago, during the War of Inheritance. Because of their help in achieving victory, the surviving soldiers were given a plot of land and the means to build a house where they could live with their families. As the decades passed, and the city engulfed the area, the neighborhood became a clear representation of the city's lower-middle class. It also remained home to a lot of military families, quite a few of which had members in the city guard as well.

Within the neighborhood, Arthurows continued until they reached a far larger structure, similar to a closed baseball field.

Here we are, Arthurows said. The combat arena.

They hold tournaments here? Dallion asked.

Nah. The name is just for show. This is where the moderately well off get together to gossip, discuss important matters, and occasionally spar a bit in the awakened realm. Mostly gossip, though. Come along, I'll introduce you.

A military tent village Dallion couldn't help but wonder if his grandfather had been part of it once? He had taken part in the war, and was known, if Aspion's memory was to be believed. Since no one had removed his grandfather's name, he must have remained in the history books in some form.

Passing through a large set of double doors, Arthurows flashed a token of some sort to the pair of massive guards, who didn't even react. Judging by the silvery hilts of their weapons, Dallion could assume that they were awakened as well.

A surprisingly modern looking lobby awaited on the inside: thick carpets covered the floors, not to mention the hundreds of portraits that filled up every inch of wall space.

Welcome to the Combat Arena, a fury in a butler's outfit greeted them. Unlike Jiroh, her skin was milk white, just a shade darker than her hair. Could I be of any assistance?

There was a smile on her face, but Dallion's keen sense of perception, combined with his music skills, told him that she couldn't wait for them to leave.

Can you take a message to General Balall? Arthurows asked. Let him know Art is here.

But of course. Would you like to sit down and rest in the meantime?

No, Im good, Arthurows said dismissively.

The furys smile didnt falter. Dallion could sense she wanted to kick him in the face the bubbling anger in her was almost palpable, almost as much as Arthurows pleasure of ordering her around.

Thank you, Dallion said in an attempt to diffuse the situation. We appreciate the offer.

It wasnt the best line Dallion could think of on the spot, but it did the job. A faint sensation of understanding appeared in the cocktail of anger, after which the fury nodded slightly and went off towards the oak door leading further in.

Dallion waited until several seconds after she had gone, then looked at Arthurows.

Dont worry about it. She just works here. As long as you have an invitation token all the servants must treat you with respect and dignity.

Shes a fury?

Theres a few of them around the city. Not as many as in the imperial capital, but enough to be noticed. Dont give it too much thought. They are bound by Nerosals rules like everyone else. Besides, she isnt awakened.

Come to think of it, Jiroh wasnt awakened either. Or was she? Nothing indicated it, and Jiroh herself had denied it, but her speed was much faster than a normal person. Even with all his improvements in body and reflexes, Dallion could hardly keep up to her pace of serving people at the inn.

Dont freak out when we get to the general, Arthurows said. His title is hereditary. There havent been real generals in this city since before I was born. He just keeps it for show. Try not to contradict him, though creates a bad first impression and in the eyes of people here impressions are everything.

Ill try to keep that in mind. Is he a noble?

Nah, nobles wouldnt be seen dead talking to riff-raff like us. Arthurows let out a dry laugh. Hes just rich and connected the type of commoner that nobles would actually talk to on occasion. For our purposes, he has quite an impressive collection of awakened weapons and armor. Part was inherited, part he got by buying stuff here and there. Not all of it, from shops.

Now things made sense. The general was a rich collector. Dallion had heard of such people even back on Earth. They had amassed a fortune and spent part of it in a useless hobby in this case, apparently, collecting awakened gear that would never be used.

Anything else I should know? Dallion asked. He was starting to regret agreeing to this.

Just one. Avoid looking him in the eyes.

Chapter 124: The General

The inside corridor was even more luxurious than the lobby. However, even that paled in comparison to the Generals quarters. The room was so vast that it could easily be close to a thousand square meters. Intricate carpets and furniture gave way to a massive sand garden that occupied the far half of the room. The only catch was that the sand was composed of grains of gold, and the stone boulders were of a metal Dallion had never seen before. But all that wasnt the most impressive part. The walls of the room were entirely covered with weapons, each more impressive than the next. In addition, there were several display cases that held even more.

Back already, Art? a young voice asked.

A rather athletic man in his early twenties with raven black hair sat in a large couch-chair, reading a scroll which Dallion could assume to be the daily newspaper. Judging by the silver scroll rods, it was probably the financial edition. Dressed in a shirt made entirely of gold thread, the man rolled up the scroll and put it aside.

Two guards stood on either side. Each had a marble mask hiding their entire face, but Dallion could tell by their ears that they were furies.

Apologies, General, but I thought I might use the opportunity to present you Marchs favorite, Arthurows said with a deep bow.

So thats him? The general sounded amused. I would have thought hed be a bit more impressive.

Unsure of proper etiquette, Dallion quickly bowed as well.

Oh, no need for that. I use the title more as a joke. It drives the geezers in the club insane. The general smirked. Most of them long for the days of my grandfather when men were real men, women were real women, and all would spend months fighting the enemies of the heir every day. He waved his hand as he spoke. But enough about that. I hear that youve quite the late bloomer. Completed your first exploration trial from the get go, carrying an entire group.

I failed, sir, Dallion said beneath his breath.

Nonsense. You passed the trial requirements. Just because they imposed a stupid rule doesnt make you a failure.

He also passed his first exploration job, Arthurows added. A three-level sphere item. Went through the whole thing too.

Did he? The general whistled. Thats good to know. So, what brings you here? I doubt youve come just to make my acquaintance.

I

He needs a shield, Arthurows interrupted. I found him going through the second-hand circuit, so I thought of you.

Did you now? The general laughed with the tone and manner of a noble in an animated movie. Trick question. Of course, I do. He spread his arms. My grandfather started collecting high grade specimens at the end of the war. Some of them you cant even find nowadays. I picked up from where he left off after the death of my father. Poor papa never found the thrill which is why he gave them all to me, even before he passed away. A shame, really. He could have bought quite a few more, but let them slip through his fingers. I had to spend quite a lot of effort to track them down.

Dallion could only nod.

Art here has helped me find some rather unique ones. This piece, for example. The general pointed at something on the opposite wall. Without a word one of his guards flashed out of sight, then reappeared again holding a cane-sword of black metal.

Its only a five-level weapon, but with a twist. None of my servants have managed to get past the second level.

What does it do? Dallion asked before he could stop himself. He was definitely going to have to learn some etiquette, and fast. Thankfully, the general seemed to obsess with the item of his collection to notice.

No one knows. Thats the whole point about sphere items. You never know what they might do. Thats their allure. Some people choose to deliberately keep their destiny unfulfilled. That way, they dont risk the price of the item falling in value. Me, I just want to know. If it turns out to be a dud, theres always the next one, he laughed.

Maybe we could look around your shield section, General? Arthurows suggested. After all, theres none other like it in the city.

Thats absolutely correct. The young snob tossed the cane to his fury. Some people are still upset about it. Then again, the world of weapon collecting is quite cutthroat. The left corner of his mouth curved up in a smile. Please, this way.

The general led them to the other side of the room, to the small carpeted lane just beyond the gold sand garden. Over three dozen shields of various sizes and nature were displayed on the wall. Most of them were made of sky silver, some of a reddish metal that Dallion hadnt seen before. There were round shields, square shields, tower shields, even what could only be described as a butterfly shield. Dallion had no doubt that it was linked to some skills, just as he was certain hed never be able to use it adequately.

So many shields, so little knowledge. The logical thing to do was ask Nil for advice. Before that, though, Dallion decided to try one thing more.

Dallion froze, then glanced at Arthurows and the General. Both were waiting expectantly for him to choose a shield. Clearly none of them had said a word. But if not them, who?

Dallion didnt know how to react. He couldnt just answer outright. Even in the awakened world that would seem strange. Instead, he leaned closer to the shields, examining them one by one.

Havent reached the higher levels? Thats fine. Im just so glad to have found someone that could hear. Talking with these relics gets really boring.

Dallion bit his tongue.

Everything okay? Arthurows asked concern bubbling from him.

Yeah. Just admiring the craftsmanship, Dallion lied.

Two rows up and to the left The shield there was triangular in shape, composed of a series of overlapping sky silver segments. As far as Dallion could tell, there was nothing particularly special about it, apart from it being able to freely talk to him for some reason.

Intrigued, Dallion reached out and gently took it off the wall. The shield felt unusually light, as if it were made of aluminum. On the back it had a pair of leather straps by which to be held in battle.

The armadill? the General asked in astonishment. A creative choice, no doubt. More for show than anything else. Not something Id use in battle, but it has its fans. If memory serves, it was used quite a lot during the century wars a few hundred years back. Since then, its fallen out of favor.

Dallion put the shield on. It almost felt like having a really large buckler. Other than the unusual composition, there didnt seem to be anything special about it.

What does it do? Dallion asked, moving it about as he followed one of the guard sequences hed memorized.

Other than protection, nothing I could think of. There used to be a lot of them at one point, until the Archduke bought most of them out. If only I had known. My grandfather had an entire armory of those from the war. At one point I couldnt give away the things. Then one day a merchant guild bought them all up. Next thing I knew there werent any anywhere. The one I kept in my room was the only one left.

Normally, Dallion would have considered this to be a sales pitch, but the emotions coming from the general told him that wasn't the case.

It must be quite valuable, I take it, Dallion said as he took it off.

Dear boy, nothing is too valuable. If that's what you want to buy

Rent, Arthurows corrected.

If that's what you want to rent, who am I to stop you. However, since you'll be risking a piece of my collection. There's a small favor I'd like in return.

As I said, none of my servants or the mercenaries I hired managed to clear the second level of the sphere cane. Maybe you'd be willing to have a go? A greedy glint appeared in the General's eyes. Fulfill its destiny and the shield is yours to keep.

Dallion's heart skipped a beat. This was more than a good deal, it was a great deal, and still it was completely unachievable. There was no way Dallion could clear a five-level item on his own. Furthermore, this wasn't a simple dagger, but an actual weapon. Even the first level guardian would likely be a lot tougher than he had imagined.

I don't think I'll be able to Dallion said. Despite the temptation to charge head on, he knew what was beyond him. For now, at least. Any chance I can rent the shield until I reach the level to clear the cane? He offered a warm smile.

The general paused, then put a finger on his lips, musing over the idea. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell that Balall was intrigued by the idea, although there was still a loud vibration of hesitation coming from him.

Tell you what, I'll let you convince me. He snapped with his fingers. One of the furies disappeared again. Moments later she returned, carrying a golden harpsword. The model was very different from Dallion's shorter with twice as many strings. Art tells me you fought with a harpsword during your selection trial. Use it to convince me in the awakened realm and I'll let you rent the shield for three golds per month.

Area Awakening

Reality changed. A desert of gold stretched in all directions.

You are in the land of ROOM.

Defeat the guardian to change the land's destiny.

This was unexpected. Dallion looked around. The general was there, as were his furies. However, there was no sign of Arthurows.

Sorry for the mess, the general said casually. I've been meaning to upgrade this place, but could never find the time.

You're an awakened?

You seem surprised.

Art said that you weren't.

Hmm. Well, that's probably because I'm not, the general laughed. They are, though. Now, back to business.

The fury carried the sword to Dallion.

Make me give you the shield. An ominous smile appeared on the general's face. You have two tries.

Chapter 125: The Shield Dryad

Dallion slid his fingers along the blade of the golden harp'sword. His improved senses made him aware of the fine craftsmanship that had gone into its forging. It was as if his fingers were sliding along air. And still, it didn't feel like his harp'sword. There was something inalienably foreign about it, even if he couldn't determine exactly what.

Go ahead. The general waved his hand. Test it if you want, but you only get two tries when you start for real.

Two tries hardly enough for such a task. On the other hand, Dallion had nothing to lose if he failed, and so much to gain if successful. Carefully, he pulled each of the strings. The tones were perfect, although different from the ones his weapon made. In a way it was simpler whoever had made this had focused on copying the full octave. That meant, though, that matching a vibration would follow a different method. Everything that Dallion had learned so far had pretty much gone to waste.

Why two tries? Dallion asked.

Everyone deserves a second chance. No matter the circumstances.

A sound philosophy, which didn't make things much easier at present. From experience Dallion knew that if he didn't make it the first time, he'd need at least ten more times to get it right. It was the same in video games succeed on the first go, or ragequit after a dozen failures, then succeed after cooling down.

Can I try it out on an object before I go for it? Dallion asked in hope.

Smart move. The general clapped. That shows me you really know how to use a harp'sword. The answer is no. You either go all out or not at all.

What if I use my first attempt on the object, then?

Hmm.

You said I have two goes, so even if I fail, I get a second try. I just want to have my first try on something other than you.

I guess you caught me. The general nodded to one of the furies. The guard reached out and summoned a small jade vase. Let me up the ante, then. This vase costs about a hundred gold in the real world. If you're confident enough in your abilities, I'll let you have your first try on it. However, should you fail in your second attempt, you'll owe me ten gold if you break it, which is ten percent of its standard price. The man's eyes narrowed. Of course, if the vase remains unharmed, you won't owe me anything at all.

It was obvious that the general was playing mind games, or to be more precise, he didn't want to be outdone by clever logic. For a moment Dallion thought that he had been clever, but as he quickly found out, there was no outsmarting someone with money and influence who wanted to end up on top. Or maybe there was.

Sure, Dallion replied. There was a small loophole that the general had left open. At no point did Dallion say he would want to break the item during his practice trial. All that had been assumed.

As with the tome in the ring library, a single tone came from the item with an unbreakable calm surrounding it. With this harpsisword, that meant playing two notes simultaneously. The fingers of his left hand still stung a bit each time he touched the strings, but it was nowhere as bad as it could have been.

How to change an emotion. Nil hadn't explained the process in detail, and Dallion hadn't read so far ahead. It was an advanced use of the music skills, that was for sure. From what Dallion could assume, the trick was to change the melody part way in. Going by standard logic, the first note was to attune to the target, that's the reason it froze, it was waiting for the next input. Going by that theory, he had to play the combination of emotions he wanted the target to obtain following the exact same timing.

If the vase displayed calm, Dallion had to replace it with a combination of tenderness and excitement. Thinking back, he had seen a lot of instances of excitement during his battles, but only one of tenderness.

So far, so good. At least the timing didn't cause any problem. The real trick started now, though. Instead of two strings, Dallion was going to have to play five, if his assumptions of melody conversion were correct.

Waiting for just the right moment, he pulled the strings with the fingers of both hands. The melody kept sounding. That was the good part. The effect, however, was less than what he had hoped for. Instead of changing, the vase was now oscillating between its original frequency and the new one. Was this a good thing? Dallion's subconscious told him it was along with the slight headache that had started to form in the area of his temples. Holding his breath, he repeated the process.

This time the effect was immediate. The calm gone, the vase flew towards him, as if attracted by a magnet. The action was so sudden that Dallion could only pull the shield in front of him for protection. A loud crash told him that wasn't the best choice.

Excellent, the general said with a snobbish smirk and a slow clap. I must say, this is the first time I see an item react this way. You still owe me ten gold coins, however. Well, that is unless you convince me otherwise. He crossed his arms with a cocky look on his face. Ready for the real thing?

Yes, General, Dallion said, taking a deep breath. He had to remain calm on this. If he allowed himself to get provoked, the battle was as good as over. He focused his senses on the new target.

Calmness and excitement merged into one, displaying doubt. At the same time, Dallion could sense another type of excitement on its own.

As the markers reached the tip, Dallion played the new set of strings. Part of the general's emotions began to oscillate, though not as much as they had with the vase. That was to be expected; he was a sapient being, after all. Keeping his cool, Dallion repeated the process a second time, then a third, and a fourth.

Bit by bit the oscillation shifted in his favor, but still the doubt wouldn't dissipate. It was almost as if with every success a new doubt emerged. Normally, that wouldn't have been a bad thing, yet with each time Dallion played a chord, the pain in his head and fingers increased. By the seventh time he felt like burning pins were drilling into the back of his skull. By the tenth, his vision was starting to blur.

Why wouldn't the doubt go away? There was only a sliver of it left, but it had been there the last four times as well, refusing to leave. Dallion's initial theory had been correct, and the execution had remained spot on, so why wasn't the general changing his mind? Something had to be missing, but what?

Quickly, Dallion waited for the correct moment, then added a note of joy.

There was a long moment of silence. Dallions head was still pounding, but he forced himself to smile.

Sorry about that, the general said, with a slight yawn of disappointment. My guards get twitchy when music is involved. You can never be too careful with those higher skills. In any event, you managed to convince me. A bit unorthodox, I must admit. Personally, I thought you'd follow a different approach, but I'll gladly consider this a win as well.

So, he passed? Arthurows asked.

With flying colors. Provided he has the three gold, of course.

Dallion returned the harpsisword to the fury, then reached into his pouch and took out three gold coins. While it was good to have an adequate shield, the action had pretty much bankrupt him for the week, not to mention that in twelve days he'd have to pay the same amount for the second month.

Life was definitely getting expensive. The arrangement with Hannah might have allowed him to find a room rent free, but that didn't go for his gear. At the end of the day, there was no such thing as living rent free in Nerosal.

My offer still stands, the general said. Fulfill the cane's destiny and you get to keep the shield. Until then, I wish you the best of luck.

Thank you, General. Dallion made a slight bow. On the inside, he was sweating bullets. He had gone through some close calls so far, but this felt more terrifying than all of them. Had he messed up he would have ended up with the equivalent of a student loan he would have had serious difficulties paying off. Even now, the situation wasn't as rosy.

Use it with care. The general had one of the furies give Dallion the armadil shield. Now that we've concluded that, Kilina will show you out. The man turned around, making his way to his seat near the entrance. Thanks for the treat, Art. Entertaining as always. Please come back if there's anything else you wish to rent. I'm sure it could be arranged.

Given what this test was, Dallion had no intention of asking for anything else. Not to mention, he didn't have the funds to rent any more gear.

The fury from the reception appeared shortly after, escorting Arthurows and Dallion out of the room. Nothing was said while she did so, at least not out loud. Arthurows seemed unusually relieved with the entire situation, as for Dallion

Item Awakening

Dallion entered the shield. Apart from being tired of participating in a one-sided conversation, he wanted to see the guardian he had rented.

The SHIELD is Level 2

You are in an elegant sky silver room.

Defeat the guardian to change the SHIELDs destiny.

Knowing how difficult it was to improve sky silver, Dallion had no intention of trying. Unlike the rooms he had seen before, this one was shaped like a tower, or rather like a very chic maisonette that extended five floors high. It was well lit, perfectly furnished, with a winding staircase ascending up along the walls.

Up here, the voice said, far more melodic than it sounded on the outside. Sorry I couldnt greet you, but you know the rules.

Of course, the rules a guardian couldnt leave its chamber. Cautiously, Dallion made his way to the start of the staircase and looked up.

No need to worry, I wont attack you, the guardian laughed. After finally finding someone, I can talk to, itll be a waste. Come right up.

There was a definite sincerity in the shields voice. Leaving all hesitation behind, Dallion started the long climb up. Each section of the tower was very different from what he expected it to be. Apart from the floor, each was fashioned like a master bedroom of a different style based on the time of day. The fifth floor, of course, was the one that held the guardian and he too was not at all what Dallion had expected.

SHIELD GUARDIAN

Species: Dryad

Class: Shadow

Statistics: 100% Health

Skills:

- **Splinter Arrows**
- **Entangle**
- **Regrowth**

Weak spots: none

No weak spots? That was always something to be cautious of. The most unexpected feature of the guardian, though, was his appearance. Half-naked, he resembled more a model or a male pop-idol than an actual guardian. Slender, but with pronounced muscles and long green curly hair, he was probably perfect for a Twilight novel. The trousers he was wearing were more like britches ending above his knees, as if he were about to grab a surf at any moment.

Hey, you made it, the dryad said once Dallion reached the top floor. I must say it feels good to finally see some action again. Ive been pinned to a wall for so long, Ive almost forgotten how to move.

You're welcome Dallon blinked. He had this feeling as if he had come to visit the playboy on campus. Aren't you? he pointed.

Huh? The dryad looked down at his chest. Oh, the clothes. Yeah, sorry about that. I'm not up to the latest fashion. Give me some time and I'll get my bearings. Just bring me to a few social events and I'll pick up something stylish.

Err, that's not exactly the issue. This was without a doubt the weirdest guardian Dallon had seen. Well, second weirdest, after the copyette. He was just as talkative, though, if not more so. Shouldn't you be more combat oriented and all?

I guess I can put some armor on if you want. The dryad shrugged. Your choice really. Well, actually it's partially your choice. You might have me, but my owner remains Balall. Until you win me over, that is. No pressure, but I'd really appreciate it if you do that. As I said, being part of an ancient collection isn't the best experience.

Anyway, I just wanted to let you know, anytime you need comfort after a long day or a difficult trial, I'm here to accommodate. And don't worry, you don't have to tell me your preferences, I'm a very good observer.

Okay, just stop! Dallon snapped. This is getting way too awkward.

It is? I hadn't noticed. There was a brief pause. You are aware I'm a companion shield, right?

Look, I've only been awakened for a month, so maybe tone the weirdness down a bit, okay? All I want to know right now is just how to use you in battle.

A month? the guardian asked. And you only rented me because you wanted a shield?

Yeah. You were the one who spoke to me, so I thought you'd be a good fit. That's how I found my harp sword pretty much.

The dryad remained silent for several seconds, eyes fixed on Dallon, then shook his head with a sigh.

Oh dear, he said. I think there's some explaining I need to do.

Chapter 126: Future Apprentice

Companion armor, as Dallon found out, turned out to have the exact meaning he feared. When he had initially asked Nil, the old echo had paused for ten full seconds before going ahead with the explanation. Apparently, a few centuries ago having armor with companion guardians in them had been extremely popular, to the extent that guardians had been specifically selected and taught how to perform that function to perfection. Dallon didn't need to hear the details, but for all intents and purposes, the shield he had gone through so much trouble of procuring was the living equivalent of female armor to coin the phrase of the world's past.

That definitely explained the guardians appearance and demeanor, not to mention the awakening realm of the item itself. The fact that the shield was actually useful in combat made everything arguably worse. While in the awakened realm, the shield segments could increase in size and number, stretching to become a tower shield, or wrap around his entire arm like a gauntlet.

Dallions guard skills had also changed, displaying guard markers allowing Dallion to extend the shield so as to form a barrier. While initially it seemed comical, after a bit of practice, Dallion discovered this ability to be quite useful. However, there was one annoying thing that remained

Dallion gritted his teeth. Being the only one capable of hearing the shield, he couldnt do anything about it in public. Instead, he had to listen to the melodic ramblings as he walked about. It was bad enough listening to advice how Dallion could do his job better during lunch. He could only imagine what would happen when he went to visit Eury. Sadly, he had little choicehe needed to return the shirt she had given him.

Ive only been in the city for a few weeks, Dallion whispered through gritted teeth.

A few weeks? Cant say youve missed much by the looks of things. Then again, you came from a village in the middle of nowhere, right? I guess this is a step up, but if you really want to kick things up a notch, you must find a way to get to a country capital. Thats where the important things take place. Everything else is nothing but a reflections shadow.

An interesting metaphor, no doubt, but right now that was the least of Dallions concerns. The only things in his immediate agenda were to earn enough money from guild jobs to pay for an awakening trial in one of the citys awakening shrines and then break through his level ten gate. Once that was done, he could finally complete his selection trial and possibly claim the armadil shield as his own. Despite the constant talking and the guardians somewhat uncomfortable behavior, the shield was a level two.

As he reached Euryales workshop, Dallion noticed that a few more statues had been added to her garden. Thankfully, most of them were of animals. The realism with which they were made, nonetheless, made him question whether they had been sculpted or the result of instant petrification.

Youre going to see a gorgon?

Eury? Dallion said loudly as he entered the workshop. Ive come to return

He suddenly stopped. Unlike the previous times, the gorgon wasnt alone. Three quite massive figures clad in full plate armor glanced in his direction. While Dallion had only been in the city for

less than a month, there were a few basic things he had picked up. One of them was instantly identifying the city guard insignia. Two of the people standing in the room, a few steps away, held the rank of captain, while the third had a pair of silver swords and a crown on his pauldron, indicating he was the city guards lieutenant commander.

Give me just a minute, Dal, Euryale looked at him while simultaneously looking at everyone else. Im just finishing something here.

Sure. Dallion smiled, doing his best, trying to keep that smile from turning guilty. Ill wait outside until

Stay here, one of the captains said. Her tone of voice made it difficult to determine whether that was a request or an order. Dallion decided not to risk it and quickly moved to the nearest wall.

What do you think? The lieutenant commander turned back to the gorgon, not overly bothered by Dallions presence.

Its possible, Euryale said as she examined one of the captains gauntlets. Could also be a coincidence. All in all, its a coin flips chance. Is the first time it has happened?

The second. The first one happened two months ago.

I see what you mean. The gorgon focused on the gauntlets more. From where he was, Dallion had no direct line of sight to see what the discussion was about. It might not be a coincidence, though its still too early to tell. I can ask about it, but aside from that I dont think Ill be of much help.

Right. The lieutenant commander nodded to his subordinates. With a nod of their own, they made their way out of the workshop, passing by Dallion as if he werent there. Tell me if you learn anything.

As always, the gorgon said. Think you can handle it on your own?

For the moment. If things get worse, I know where to go. The man left as well.

Just dont wait too long, Eury shouted behind it.

Dallion swallowed. He had no idea what exactly he had stumbled upon, but he could feel the seriousness of the situation. Should he ask her? Or should he pretend as if nothing had happened? It was at times like this that Dallion felt his recklessness being too reckless.

Hey, Dal! the gorgon said with a wide smile the moment the city guards had left. They come here from time to time, to consult me on stuff. Not the best arrangement, but it pays, and I dont have to worry about my statue problem. What brings you here?

Err Dallion tried to maintain his composure. I thought Id return the shirt you gave me. There was a slight moment of hesitation. And buy a few more.

Oh, thats a gift. Though, its always nice to have you visit. She placed her on his shoulder. What have you been up to? New shield? She glanced at the item on his back.

Yea, something I got for rent, Dallion said quickly. Thought Id need one if Im to take more exploration missions.

Not a bad choice, though I'd have gone with something a bit more basic. By the looks of it, you'll need some time to get used to having this in battle.

So Dallion cycled through a few topics of conversation. He could always ask something they'd already spoken about, or he could ask her for a new lesson. Somehow, he doubted that would be the best approach at present. Maybe, it was best to continue with the clothes line. Anything you'd recommend?

Too many things. The gorgon laughed. I'm not sure you'd be comfortable with either.

Did you get used to the trick I taught you?

Oh, yeah. Dallion nodded. Definitely. Very useful. This was the point at which he avoided sharing that he had been a packrat on his first mission. On that note, I was wondering how I can call for a weapon, or shield, to my hand directly.

That? Eury asked, as she went to the single rack of clothes in the room. You can't at this point. You need to get your skills above ten. You'll soon get there, though. She took out a grey shirt with rather long sleeves. How much do you have to spend?

A gold and change. Dallion replied.

A gold and change Euryale let go of the grey shirt, then took a white one. In every aspect it seemed normal, Although Dallion suspected that not to be the case. This would suit you. Try it on.

Of course, she'd ask that. Knowing her for this long, though, Dallion had gotten used to it. Taking the shirt with a smile, he proceeded to put it on. The difference was felt immediately. He didn't need to awaken the item to know it was at least fifteenth level, if not more. Wearing it felt as if he was wearing a cloud.

It suits you. Win some more money and I'll make you a few things to match.

I'll do that. Dallion considered putting his armor-thread shirt back on, but found he preferred to remain in this one. Maybe he'd change back once he'd had an actual job. Until then, this was loads better. Another thing, I was thinking about buying some proper armor. Do you think there's a point, or should I wait till after I pass my double-digit trial?

Who said there was no such thing as smart eye-candy? The snakes on Eury's head moved about. Given that you don't have money to spare, I'd say wait. Once you enter double digit territory, you'll know a lot more about yourself than now. Then you can decide what direction you want to go to. There's always a cost, as well as a benefit. Decided on a short blade?

Not yet. I'm thinking of putting that off for later.

Suit yourself. If there's one thing, I'd waste money on, it's that. Short blades are useful everywhere.

I can see that, but I have my sights on something. If all goes well I'll get it as soon as I become a double digit.

I'll be keeping my fingers crossed.

Theres something else, I wanted to ask, Dallion said once he had cleared his throat. If I get a choice of skills, which should I choose? Athletics, Acrobatics, or Forging?

Forging? Half of the gorgons snakes moved about in chaotic fashion. That's an unexpected jump.

I was offered it once before. Im unsure whether I should pick it if Im offered again.

Well, thats a question only you can answer. Unless youre talking about magic. Theres no such thing as a good or bad skill. I know forgers who spend their days minting coins two months per day in a nobles mansion. I also know acrobats that have become theater celebrities. Some even send me invitations to performances that cost more than I make in half a year if I were to buy it using normal means. The trick is to know what you want.

Dallion sort of expected this sort of answer, but he had to admit, hearing in this fashion made the thought much less stressful.

Chances are you wont be offered a choice. Usually, a person received a new skill when breaking through this gate. Whatever you get, itll be useful, as long as you dont neglect it. Seeing your style of awakening, though, I dont think thatll be a problem.

Probably not. Dallion smiled. But still, what would you choose?

Honestly? Acrobatics. Theres always something fascinating in having full freedom of movement. But as I said, thats me. Each of the options will help you in battle.

Even forging?

Even forging. Of course, there will be a lot of things youll need to learn before you can make adequate use of it. Tell you what. She crossed her arms. If you even get forging skills, become my apprentice and Ill tell you everything I know.

Its a deal then. Dallion ignored the guardian. If I become a forger, Ill become your forger.

I was hoping youd say that. But enough of your sweet-talking. Both of us have work to do and you still owe me a gold for the shirt. She extended her hand, waiting to get paid. Just one piece of free advice. When youre a packrat, try not to get involved in combat. If you do your party will start expecting that from you and youll never be off the hook.

Chapter 127: Weapon Neglect

The second exploration mission was much less eventful than the first. Unlike last time, three of the four levels had been cleared, leaving Dallions party to mop up things. Like last time, Dallion had been paired with Janna and Kallan. Unlike then, he had left his harpsisword for a shieldafter all, he could make just as much use of his music skills using the standard lyre.

The first three floors were done without a hitch. With everything lit up, it was a simple matter of making their way to the guardian chamber and defeating the creature.

Dallion had asked to do a full exploration of the levels, possibly even to map it. His microtransaction mind considered selling the sketches along with the sketches to any would-be customer in order to increase the price. The suggestion was quickly shot down in this world people

didn't have items improved because they were interested in the process, all they were interested in was having the item fully functional.

With the exception of the guardians, all enemy creatures were similar to those that Dallion had seen before: rats, roaches, butterflies, and goblins. While it was still early, it could be assumed that most of the sphere items would have enemies of the sort.

The final guardian ended up being what Dallion could only describe as a razorblade butterfly. While annoying, ranged weapons had proved to be quite efficient from point blank range. It had also helped that Dallion had used his music skills to freeze it for a second, giving the siblings ample opportunity to dispatch it.

Pay was a third of what it had been during the previous job, but the food was the same, and there was another celebration. As it turned out, the guild didn't need a reason to have a fun feast, only an excuse.

Sadly, Dallion's skill numbers had remained the same a reminder this was what he'd remain until he went through his next awakening. The only thing he had to look forward to was save, learn and train.

Hannah had become somewhat more supportive of Dallion, despite the customer flow being reduced almost to pre-Dallion levels. Apparently, a lot of the competing inn-awakened had started copying his style, and while the trend had made a lot of people throughout the city happy, Dallion could no longer be considered special. His daily earnings had dropped to roughly twenty silvers per day, which was the standard amount from what Jiroh had told him. The fury herself was earning less than five, though somehow was still able to buy anything she wished. Dallion was certain she had a secondary source of income, even if he remained clueless as to what that source was. Both Hannah and Jiroh were very tight-lipped on the matter, and he had decided not to pry.

As the days went on, Dallion focused more on his guild work and training. Under the recommendation of Nil, the daily allowance for learning and training had been reduced to ten hours, and furthermore, he was forbidden from taking more than one guild job per day. The restrictions seemed annoying, but considering they had come from Captain Adzorg's echo, they carried a lot of weight.

And still, despite all these efforts, Dallion's savings were growing tremendously slow. There was a time when he would have considered a gold coin profit per day to be the high-life. Now it means that he'd need over a week for his first attempt at reaching level ten. And that didn't even account for the sudden expenses. The more Dallion spent time going about the city, the more fashion became a thing.

No longer was it enough to wear something nice as he had upon arrival. The clothes also had to fit in with the city itself. A large part of the unspoken rules were starting to become clear, in large part thanks to Arthurows. Wearing clothes that would identify someone as an awakened wasn't so much for the awakened to be aware of one another; they had the perception to do that anyway. It was for the ordinary people to know. And while there wasn't that much of a difference in attitude towards the awakened, there was a distinct difference in the services offered. Even in common shops and stalls awakened were given a selection of the best merchandise, for a much larger price, of course. Unable to see, taste, smell, or hear what the awakened could, normal people would be content with lesser quality items that cost roughly a fifth of the price.

The best way Dallion could describe life in Nerosal was a system of strict guidelines everyone was free not to follow. He himself had tried to resort to wearing ordinary clothes in a bid to save money faster. The itchiness that came with them quickly made him rethink his idea. Even after improving a shirt five levels, his increased perception found the difference so negligible that he had returned the clothes to the shop the very next day without asking his money back. The fact of life was that the more he increased his attributes, the more expensive clothes he would have to buy which meant once he reached double digits, his expenses were going to skyrocket.

After Dallions fifth successful exploration mission, marked by another celebratory meal, he was given a contact ring. A simple band of metal, the ring had an echo of Estezol inside that would constantly keep him apprised of guild jobs, and inform him if he were needed for a job. The only request was that Dallion enter the ring several times per day to check.

Shield, are you always awake? Dallion asked, lying in his room after a rather uneventful day.

Guardians never sleep

What is it like being a guardian?

A guardian once told me its very boring.

It could be. All depends on where the item is. I get to see everything that happens around me, within limit. Thats why its really annoying when I get put in a box. Keep that in mind keep all your items in the open, unless youre bathing or in the bathroom.

That much Dallion had quickly figured out. Even with the lax privacy standards in this world, there were some things he couldnt completely come to terms with.

If theres anything a guardian misses, its talking.

I can tell. Dallion smiled. The copyette had said the same thing. That was one of the reasons the creature hadnt attacked Dallion outright during his selection trial. What happens when youre improved?

In what way?

The whole dying and being reborn thing. Is it like a phoenix?

Not sure what a phoenix is.

Its a type of firebird that rises from its own ashes.

If you say so.

Fine, be like that. Dallion turned on his side. Ill get some sleep. Turn the chatter down.

Sleep well. Dont dream of anything I would.

The night passed incredibly fast with dreams of Dallion back on Earth. When hed had his first dream back in Dherma village, Dallion had been freaked out about it quite a lot. Lately, he had gotten to accept, even welcome them. With all the real fighting and exploration taking place, a dream of Earth was always welcome, especially since it involved the most trivial things: riding a bus, walking in a park, fixing a vending machine small things that Dallion had never thought about before, and all of which he had taken for granted.

The next morning, it was back to the usual routine.

I can give you a few gold coins, Jiroh offered at breakfast. Its not a big deal. You can pay me back whenever.

Dallion grumbled mentally. This was the reason he didnt bring his shield to breakfast. However, Estezols echo had told him about an urgent job ten minutes ago, so he had brought it down to save time.

Didnt you say you no longer added points to your skills?

Yeah. Dallion didnt remember having this discussion with her, but with days stretching into weeks, he might well have forgotten. I gain knowhow. Watching the rest of my team fight gives me ideas I try out on my own. Often to the disapproval of Nil.

The old echo was by far more conservative when it came to teaching methods than Dallion thought. Questions and new approaches were fine, but only as long as Dallion mastered the basic elements of a skill, along with their history. There was no denying that it was through this training that Dallion had memorized over three dozen attack and defense sequences, and was able to chain them freely without relying on markers. In many aspects, it was like learning chess. Back in his village, Dallion had learned some of the basic rules; here he was memorizing strategies so he wouldnt have to waste time thinking about their execution.

Maybe I can spar with you sometime? Dallion asked.

I doubt you can handle me, Jiroh replied.

Partially due to the shields way of thinking, Dallion wasnt fully certain in what context to understand that.

When you boost your reflexes another ten points, maybe.

I thought you werent awakened. Dallions eyes widened.

Whether she is or isnt is none of your business! Hanna said sharply, arriving from the kitchen. And shes not, shes just faster than youll be. And just because youre awakened doesnt mean you dont have to clean your room. Thats not included in the price.

I clean it every day.

Its cleaned for you every day. The innkeeper crossed her arms. I let Jiroh clean the rooms to keep in shape, but the way youve been throwing things on the floor, Im thinking of changing our arrangement.

Dallion was just about to say something when Hannah continued.

At least you put in some effort tidying up. I guess Ill let this go for the moment because of your trial. When you get your proper emblem, though thats it! No more slack! Youll be taking care of your room like the rest of us!

Dallion was tempted to ask who the innkeeper was referring to, but decided against it. He had gotten used to Hannahs morning grumbling, even if today she seemed a bit on the grumpy side.

And dont neglect your sword, Hannah added. The weapons too much of a masterpiece to be treated in such a way.

Im not neglecting it, Dallion protested. Im very careful with it.

You keep it on a piece of cloth beneath the floor. Hannah narrowed her eyes. To a weapon thats neglect, its bad that you cant use it properly, but youre not even taking it with you lately.

Im just a packrat. I dont need to carry it. Most of the time I dont even fight.

Then why bother with a shield and armor?

Honestly, sometimes I think you just refuse to learn! You spend every day worrying about the forks and glasses at the bar, but you dont talk to your own sword.

I dont spend every minute talking to them. Dallion felt himself fluster. In all truth, hed actually had a few conversations with a few of the glass guardians. Some had even gotten to recognize him. It

happens on occasion. And its not like they can talk back. It would have been interesting if they could.

And have you tried talking to your sword?

Dallion raised a finger about to make a counterargument, then slowly lowered his hand. Hannah was right he hadnt bothered talking to the sword, not even once. Maybe it was because he had relied on it in battle so often, maybe because, unlike the shield, it had remained silent but not once had the thought crossed his mind. Possibly it was the level that intimidated him, but that was no excuse not to enter its realm and have a conversation with its guardian.

I will, Dallion said in a low voice. Right after I come back.

You better. A sword that doesnt trust its owner is certain to betray him in battle, Hannah said.

In his heart, Dallion agreed. A visit was long overdue.

Chapter 128: Guild Emergency

Sorry Im late. Dallion rushed into the guild building. There were some issues at the inn, so I he suddenly stopped.

From his school experience back on Earth, Dallion expected a sigh, some sort of minor grumbling, or at the very least a remark about how hed arrived late on his first emergency assignment. Instead, he found the main hall packed with guild members. Quite a lot of them, Dallion had become familiar with from the daily celebration feasts some times his own, others, not.

There were several senior guild members present, all of them geared up to the teeth. Looking around, Dallion wasnt able to spot any captains. Instead, there was one thing he couldnt miss the overwhelming presence of packrats.

Hey, Dal. Arthurows gave Dallion a pat on the back. Seems like well be working together again.

You got the call as well? Dallion wondered. While he was grateful to Arthurows for the armadil shield, and found him as a cool guy, the idea of going on an exploration with him wasnt reassuring.

Everyone in the guild has. Id say all the packrats are here. Whatever happened its probably big.

Calm down, calm down, Estezol said loudly while standing on a desk. Everything will be explained shortly. No need to make a fuss.

The noise decreased, but the guild members continued discussing amongst themselves. Dallion could hear part of the whispered conversations. There was talk of injuries, people going missing, even speculations about someone dying. The particular usage of the word made shivers run down Dallions back. As far as he was aware, there wasnt supposed to be any death in the awakened realms. The worst thing that could happen and that was pretty horrifying was for someone to have their awakening powers sealed. Why was the word death used so casually, then?

Dont worry too much, Arthurows whispered. If things were really serious, we wouldnt have learned about it.

That was a cynically-corporate way of thinking, but Dallion had to admit it stood to logic. There was no practical point in dragging junior members into a fight it was obvious they couldnt win.

People kept on arriving for the next ten minutes until the room was entirely full. At that point, the guild door was closed and barred. Aware that something important was about to happen, everyone immediately went silent.

Alright. Estezol began. Some of you might have guessed already, but for the newbies, we've had an awakened disappearance.

Without hesitation, Dallion entered the realm of his library ring. The echo there was expecting him, seated calmly in its usual place.

I knew you wouldn't be able to resist, Nil sighed. Dear boy, what am I going to do with you? You're exactly like those incorrigible people that start reading a scroll from the bottom up.

It took a moment for Dallion to catch the meaning. When he did, he had to admit that it was amusing.

Estezol is talking about an exploration gone bad, Nil continued. As you've already seen, sphere items follow different rules. In some cases, the levels aren't just corridors or mazes, they are entire miniature realms stacked one atop the other.

Please try not to be so smug about it. Nil narrowed his eyes.

Smug? Me? Dallion feigned innocence. Just because I'm right? Never.

The behavior was obviously childish, but Dallion felt that he had earned it after suffering Nil's training regiments all these months.

Thirty levels? That was impressive indeed. Having to go through so many would be a serious investment in time and people. Guild members probably worked round the clock clearing level after level, like peeling off the layers of an onion. And just like onion, there likely was a lot of swearing and tears involved.

Every now and again a person, or group of people get lost.

Lost? Dallion interrupted. I thought a person could always leave a realm at will.

Have you already forgotten everything I've taught you, Nil sighed heavily. You cannot leave an awakened area if the owner expressly forbids you to. Unless

Unless you are stronger than the owner, Dallion finished the sentence.

Some sphere items are their own owners. The only points at which one can leave are upon completing a level. Killing oneself off doesn't always work. The person would just end up lying on the ground, waiting for someone to drag them out. But that's not the tricky part. Sometimes, a person remains inside even after they have let go of the items in real life.

What do you mean?

Imagine a team of five awakening an item. Once they return to the real world, no time has passed. They simply release the item and continue with the rest of their day. Well, in some cases one of the people just collapses on the floor. Real time continues to flow, but their so-called soul remains in the item. Scholarly circles call this a type of soul confusion.

Dallion froze. He had heard the term before, though in an entirely different context.

Oh, dont worry, its not that serious. Nil crossed his arms at the sight of Dallions shocked expression. All it takes to fix this affliction is for a group to enter the realm, find the person in there, and complete the level in question. When that happens, everything is returned to normal.

The explanation sounded too good to be true. If it were really that harmless, why had so many people been called and with such an amount of urgency at that?

So, by lost Estezol is referring to a lost soul? Dallion asked.

If youre into that kind of terminology, yes, I suppose. Again, you have almost nothing to worry about. Like all the other packrats youll just be doing the carrying. The greatest challenge you might face is to carry the actual lost, if your group happens to stumble upon them.

The addition of the word almost made Dallion a lot more tense. If Nil wanted to get him frightened, he was doing a pretty good job. Then again, fear didnt work too well on the reckless.

What creatures will I be facing?

I have no idea. My original isnt involved in exploration activity. Thats Marchs area of expertise. Adzorg tends to focus on ways to actually improve the skills of the guild members, not brainless adventures in relics of the past. The only thing certain about the past ages is that they are no more, and its best that all reminders of that time are buried away with them.

Of course. Dallion saw no logic in what was said. Thanks for the info, Nil. Ill be back if I have any more questions.

Please, please, come again, the echo said in the most sarcastic fashion possible. Im always looking forward to these little chats. After all, why bother reading an unadulterated masterpiece, when I can summarize it in a few minutes?

Instead of an answer, Dallion left the ring, instantly returning to the real world.

Its usually a rare occurrence, but with so many explorations going on, its inevitable to occur every now and again, Estezol continued. The key point is that all of you help find some of our guild members in the awakened realms as quickly as possible. For this purpose, youll be divided into groups. Its of vital importance that you listen to everything your group leader says, and above all, no heroics! Youre packrats, so youre here for support. Any questions, anyone?

There were none.

Good. In that case, listen for your names and head to the third floor when you do. Oh, and youll all receive a two gold bonus at the end of this mission, provided we safely retrieve the lost.

Any bonus if were the one who finds them? Someone asked. Dallion vaguely remembered seeing that person at the selection trial.

No, Estezol said adamantly. This is not a competition. Were rescuing some of our own.

With that, the briefing in effect ended. Estezon remained standing on the desk, answering occasional questions, but the group formation had already begun. People were being called out from the staircase one by one.

Arthurows was among the first to be called. A regular guild member, he was no doubt part of a real group, not a mere packrat. That made Dallion feel a bit better.

Ill only get a mentor when I pass my trial, Dallion said under his breath as quietly as he could.

Dallion groaned mentally. There were times he seriously wondered why he was paying three gold coins for the shield.

The room was half-empty when Dallion was called. Feeling slightly anxious, he made his way up the staircase to the third floor. So far, he hadnt been in that section of the building. The sight surprised him. As it turned out, the entire fourth floor was divided into four extremely large rooms. The one Dallion was directed to had a mirror-like item in the center. Eight people surrounded it, placing a hand on the mirrors frame. Their other hand was stretched out so that a group of six more people could grab hold.

This is how large groups enter?

Dallion wondered. If he didnt know better, hed say he was back in kindergarten. Given that it took a single instant for any number of people to enter the awakened realm, the method was perfect for allowing large groups to participate. The eight people with direct contact were going to be the leaders, and everyone grabbing hold to them was to be part of their group. By Dallions calculations, over fifty people were going to take part. The question was what were they going to find.

Dallion, Vend shouted. Grab hold.

Dallion rushed towards the man and did as he was told. Was it a coincidence that hed be part of his future-mentors group? In theory, everything was possible, but somehow Dallion doubted it.

Youre just a packrat, Vend said. Got it?

Yes, Dallion replied.

That means no fighting and no music.

Got any weapons? Vend asked.

Just one. Dallion tapped the section above his right boot with his free hand.

Dont use it unless you have to.

Sphere Item Awakening

The PUZZLE DRESSER is level 12 of 20

Puzzle dresser? The name sounded quite anticlimactic. Dallion had expected it to be a weapon at some sort, or at the very least some long-range observation gizmo. Instead, they had entered a fancy makeup table.

You are at the START of the PUZZLE DRESSERs first level

Unseal all levels to fulfill the PUZZLE DRESSERs destiny.

Several hundred feet ahead, two groups were making their way forward at a hastened pace.

Listen up, Vend said. Well be making our way to level twelve. The main groups have already cleared the levels, so we wont have any guardian problems. Even so, be careful with the small critters. Its likely the A-team didnt get them all, especially further down we go. If anyone sees something suspicious, let me know right away. Remember, were not here to fight, were here to find those of us whove become lost. One day the same thing could happen to any of you. Keep that in mind before rushing off to do some heroics.

Dallion swallowed. This wasnt an experience he ever wanted to go through.

Chapter 129: Crackling Fear

Walking through the sphere items level was like walking through an awakened areathe distances were large and the threats made use of the environment. Three things became clear very early on. The first was that the creatures were much more intelligent, merging and breaking up in a way to gain the greatest advantage of their surroundings. Dallion had watched a giant boar-like creature burst into hundreds of piglets in order to pass through a bush of crystal, then merge again to minimize the effects of a crossbow volley. No wonder that the guild didnt want newbies facing off such creatures. Even one such pack would wipe the floor with a random packrat. Looking at things realistically, Dallion thought he would have a very hard time winning against it in a one-to-one fight.

The second important lesson to keep in mind was that plants, like creatures, could also be lethal. Approaching too close to the popdragons caused the orange blossoms of the flower to explode, scattering a multitude of poisonous needles in anyone nearby. So far there had been no fatalities, but two packrats from another group had had their health deduced by a third. Dallion made a mental

note not to approach anything that had bright colors, and be especially careful where he stepped. Judging by the reaction of the others in his group, he wasn't the only one.

Finally, there was the third fundamental discovery—the guardian chamber was hidden. Upon first hearing it, Dallion had thought that it was a matter of going through the entire level, at most having to figure out a way into the heart of a dense forest, a hollow column, or something of the sort. The truth was much more different. Apparently, mind and perception were just as important when it came to large explorations as were body and reflexes. Guardian arenas weren't merely a location, they were a set of conditions that made the guardian appear: a fruit that had to be put in a specific spot, a challenge that had to be made at a specific time, a set number of ingredients that had to be mixed into a potion. An exploration was no less than an epic adventure as it was described in fantasy books back on Earth. From what Dallion learned, sometimes it took decades for an adventure to be complete, thus why powerful items needed real-life years to have their destiny complete even by guilds. It also meant that packrats lived up to their name even more.

Get some of that moss as well, Vend said to Dallion, as the rest of the group was resting.

I already have some of that. Dallion did his best not to grumble, but it was getting increasingly difficult the more things he was forced to carry.

No, you don't. This one's yellow.

Dallion glared at the moss. As far as he could tell, there didn't seem to be a difference, but then again, his perception was only at ten.

Bel, Falkner, guard him.

The pair was another surprise Dallion had come across, although a welcome one. Given the number of people that took part in the exploration, it was normal to expect that his former party members would be among them. The reason Dallion hadn't seen them in up till now was because they were among those who had joined earlier. The leader of their group had been banged up by an Amber Boar, forcing them to join other existing groups. Both of them had selected Dallions.

As much as Dallion wanted to think that the two had joined because of him, he knew the real reason—they had joined because of Vend. Given his reputation, it couldn't be otherwise.

How have you guys been? Dallion asked. Spending time with them proved far more awkward than Dallion had imagined. For some reason both Bel and Falkner were racked with guilt about them passing their selection trial, to the point that they had even avoided his mission celebrations. In that aspect, they were unlike Arthurows who hadn't given a damn.

Fine, Bel replied, while Falkner still avoided Dallions gaze.

That's cool. Same mentor?

No. I got selected by Blanda, one of the scout masters of the guild. She seems to think that I can pull it off. There was a long pause. It's not as interesting as it sounds. I've been spending most of my time mending rooms at the guild one at a time. She looked at the ceiling with an annoyed expression.

That sounds harsh. Dallion was glad not to be in her shoes. Having to mend rooms a crack at a time sounded incredibly bothersome. What's the point behind that?

Training my stealth. When Im able to kill a crack without the rest finding out, Ill move on to actual scout jobs supposedly.

I bet itll be cool, Dallion encouraged her as he grabbed a handful of greenish-yellow moss. Besides, beats being a packrat. He put the moss in one of the dozens of pouches he was given by the rest of the group. What about you, Falkner? Anything interesting?

Im learning for group leader, the boy mumbled in response. Its okay.

Group lead. Dallion whistled. That sounds like quite a big deal. That means youll be leading parties soon?

Maybe For now, I just have to get strong enough to pass my double-digit trial.

Right. Im thinking of doing that as well, Dallion said. The response piqued Falkner's interest, making him turn around and look at Dallion for the first time since he had joined the group. But before that I need to get to level ten, Dallion laughed in another attempt to make Falkner feel at ease. A few more jobs after this and Ill be able to pay for an awakening trial.

I can pay for you. Falkner offered.

Dallion had heard the rumors surrounding Falkner. There was constant talk that his family was rich, not to mention noble. Money was no issue for him, especially such meager sums as a few gold coins. It would be the simplest thing in the world to accept, but a feeling of unease prevented Dallion from doing so. It was more than his fear of being indebted to anyone. It was as if a voice in the back of his head was warning him not to.

Maybe I should check my awakening room for more echoes, Dallion thought.

Thanks, but Im almost there. Dallion replied. Appreciate the offer, though.

Dont look at me, Bel said despite no one doing anything of the sort. Ive got enough for the exam. I just want to gain some actual experience before I move on from the single digit. As my grandmother used to say you only get to be a single digit once, best enjoy it because itll all get more difficult from there on.

Dont you get to be anything just once?

Dallion thought. Even so, he nodded, then grabbed another handful of moss from the ground.

It took longer than expected to fill a pouch of the moss Vend wanted. At first, he would indiscriminately pick whatever moss was closest, but after a while Nox would start mewling whenever he did. Further listening to the cub, Dallion found that the crackling could sense what he couldnt see the patches of unusual moss hidden among the rest. Difficult to come by and impossible to see, the moss was scattered about requiring Dallion to spend close to an hour to find the full amount. The fact was not lost on Bel and Falkner. Ironically, it was this annoyance at him that had driven them closer.

Took you long enough, one of the older guild members said when Dallion returned. What were you doing?

Finding what I was asked. Dallion waved the pouch. Want to check it?

I will, Vend said, then gestured to Dallion to toss him the pouch. Dallion did so without hesitation. The moss is one of the ways to call the guardian, Vend said, as he examined the moss. Get this wrong and well be in big trouble.

Dallion didnt say a word, though he suspected all this to be a test. Vend had already explained that all the guardians up to the twelfth were defeated and the gates kept open. The moss was needed for something else entirely.

What do you think? Dallion asked with a smile.

Quite good. Vend closed the pouch and tossed it back. Better than expected. Did anything happen while you were gathering it?

Not a thing, Bel replied.

Good. Packrats, gear up. Were going down.

The connection to the second level was a few hours away. The smell of smoke told everyone the direction of the area, way before they could see it. As it turned out, the first gate was in the middle of a crystal forest in the middle of a circle of stones. A simple descending spiral, similar to the ones Dallion had seen in other sphere items, went down into the ground. Just as before, the space was only large enough to allow one person to go down.

Is it certain that the group went missing on level twelve? Falkner asked, as they descended.

The gate guards would have noticed if they had come back, Dallion quickly replied. Unless the people missing are the gate guards. Either way, well learn when we get to the eleventh level.

The second level appeared to be just as large as the first, only the atmosphere was different. If the first mimicked forests and meadows, the second mimicked a lake. Smooth pools of crystal replaced water, clusters of stalagmites replaced reeds and vegetation. The massive columns were still there, though, far more numerous than on the level above.

Does the item have a pyramid structure? Dallion asked.

Just about, one of the more experienced members answered. The difference wont be noticed till the tenth level.

That was reassuring, at least, although it posed more questions.

Next spot is in the middle of that crystal lake. Vend pointed to the distance. There are no creatures here, but be careful while you walk. The place is slippery.

If this place is clear, how come there are still creatures on top? Dallion wondered.

No idea. Hiding probably. Some levels are tougher than others. First, seventh, and eight are the nasty ones. Everything else, you just need to be careful where you step. And dont touch your faces, especially you, packrats. The plants get more poisonous as we go down.

Creatures and poison this definitely sounded like a fun item to have. By the sound of it the ancients who had built it had a different understanding as to what a dresser was supposed to do.

Also, Dal, youre right. It was the guard group that went missing, Vend said all of a sudden. It was the scouts that found that out after they returned from exploring level twelve. Thats why we need the numbers. The experienced parties will be searching level twelve. Meanwhile, we, along with the rest of the packrats, will go through every inch of eleven.

What if we dont find them on either of the levels? Dallion asked.

We will.

No, I mean, what if something took them deeper?

Nothing can go between levels.

Dallion felt a chill in his stomach. Just now, for the first time since hed known him, Vend had lied. It wasnt even a very good lie. True, according to Dallions senses, the man had told the truth, but there was no denying the flawed logic. If creatures couldnt go between levels, why were so many people searching the twelfth floor?

As the group stepped onto the smooth crystal surface, the walking turned into skating. It was impressive just how easy the activity became with improved body and perception. Dallion regretted not having such powers back on Earth. For one thing it would have made learning to skate a lot less painful.

The passage to the next level was exactly where Vend had said it would be next to a camp in the middle of the crystal lake. The guards must have been here for a while, for they had erected several tents, as well as started a small campfire. Seeing Vends group, one of them rushed into a tent, then came out with a pair of scrolls, which he promptly gave to Vend. Dallion expected the scroll to be then handed to one of the packrats of the party, but surprisingly Vend kept them for himself.

Well rest a while, Vend announced. Unpack and get some sleep if you have to. Well be going through five levels after this one.

Suddenly Dallion felt Nox get on edge. Hissing like a furious kitten, the creature went into a corner of Dallions awakening room back first, ready to claw at anything that approached.

Whats going on? Dallion whispered.

He wanted to calm down his familiar, but he felt that things had gone beyond that point. Something absolutely terrified the crackling, and it was coming from the level below.

Chapter 130: Seventh Level

The further down they went, the more terrified Nox became. Dallion could feel the cracklings fear, yet wasnt able to do anything about it. He was definitely not going to link his awakening room, not with so many people here, not to mention the unspecified threat that had already caused several people to disappear. Once this was over, maybe hed ask Nil about some advice on the topic.

Reaching the third level, the party continued down. In a twisted sense of humor, it turned out that the level gates up to the seventh level were directly one above the other. That explained why all levels till there were considered safe. Most of the party were relieved upon finding that out, though not Dallion. If whatever was terrifying Nox could be felt this high up, there was no telling what it was going to be like in person.

On the sixth level Vend had the group pause, as Dallion expected. Nothing was said openly, but the party structure was somewhat adjusted. Vend and the more experienced guild members were put in front, while the packrats were left at the end. If there was such a thing as a classification by strength, this was it. Dallions abilities placed him first among the packrats which were four in total and right behind Bel. Falkner, on the other hand, was third behind Vend and a bulky silent guildie only known as Spike. Even at level ten, Falkner was far stronger than he seemed.

The first thing that everyone noticed upon arriving on the seventh level was the contrast with all the ones before. The camp was more a bunker than a camp. Buildings made of black jade rose several stories high, overlooking an eight-foot wall of crystal tiles. People with crossbows stood on the roofs of buildings, looking at the distance. None of them acknowledged the arrival of the group.

Vend. A slender woman with two sledgehammers on her back approached. You're late. She looked at the group. And with more people that you should be.

Had to take in a few from another group. Not a big deal, he replied, looking past the woman and at the wall. Things have changed here.

A group stumbled on another nest and had a swarm charge at us, the woman replied. And it's not the first time. Just because the captains can handle this doesn't mean I have to.

Listen up, Vend said loudly. We'll be heading directly to the next gate. This level hasn't been fully cleared, so stay close. No attacking things you see, no running away from them. If there's any danger, I'll take care of it.

Where did they get the materials from? Dallion whispered to Del.

The surroundings, maybe? Bel whispered back. Crafters are a weird bunch.

That could well be true, but it only showed how valuable they were. Back in his village, Dallion thought that the strength of a forger was the ability to create any item in the real world. Now he saw how wrong he had been. A forger had the ability to create things in the awakened realms as well, making them invaluable for exploration missions such as this one. Since it was impossible to bring so much raw material from the real world, Dallion assumed she had made do with what the cave provided. Looking around, his suspicions were confirmed. The most common materials he could see were crystal and black jade: the crystals composed the walls and columns, as for the jade there seemed to be several shattered hive-structures of the material visible several hundred feet away. From the information Dallion had overheard, he could assume those to be the nests.

Packrats. Vend turned to Dallion. You'll be in the middle of the group. Spike and Falkner will protect the rear. I and the rest of the fighters will be in the front. Don't use any weapons. He paused for a moment. And no music either.

That was oddly specific, but Dallion assumed there was a reason for it.

Kids shouldn't be doing this, the woman grumbled.

They'll be fine. Besides, they have to learn at some point.

Im not worried theyll get hurt. Im worried that theyll mess things up. Just because were on a time limit isnt an excuse to throw everyone here.

A sharp glance from Vend made the woman stop talking, but it was already too late. One vital piece of information had slipped through: there was a time limit. No one dared to speculate about it out loud, but the question was on everyones mind: did people die after a certain amount of time?

Were going, Vend said, then started walking towards the wall.

It soon became clear that despite its many benefits there was one thing that the wall was lacking: a gate. Getting past it involved people jumping up and helping lift the rest through. For the most part, that wasnt an issue most of the guild members had athletics or acrobatics skills. There were a few that didnt have either, though, and Dallion was among them. The fact that he wasnt the only one, made the feeling of being pulled up slightly less humiliating.

Once on the other side, the party started walking. During the first twenty minutes, everyone was on edge, reacting to every sound. Normally, Dallion would try to lighten the mood, but with Nox tense to the extreme, he felt that he couldnt. The crackling had remained with its back against the corner the entire time since the second level and there was no indication it would calm down anytime soon.

Vend, is there anything other than us that can go between levels? Dallion asked.

Not a good time to ask questions, the party leader replied.

The fact that he hadnt denied it, made Dallion feel that the answer was yes but Vend didnt want to say it out loud. That was something new. Immediately, an old fear came to Dallions mind maybe they were facing a chainling. Back during the hunt, the Dame had said the chainling had escaped into that part of the world; could she have meant that it had escaped from an item?

Nox, Dallion whispered as silently as he could. Try to calm down.

At first there was no effect. Then, slowly, the spikes covering the cubs silhouette slowly disappeared into the main form. Dallion could feel that the creature was just as tense as before, but wasnt expressing it as violently.

Wheres the threat coming from? Dallion asked.

For once, Nox couldnt give him an answer.

I think I saw something, Bel said. To the left just by the column.

Ignore it, Vend ordered. Look straight ahead.

Dallion knew he should do the same, but curiosity got the better of him. Putting a hand on his dartbow, Dallion looked in the direction Bel had described. It wasnt too difficult to spot the column in question, partially because the creatures there were already visible.

A group of red goblins stood at the cave, observing the group. Even from this distance Dallion could tell they were much stronger than the ones hed faced or rather the ones that he had seen Janna and Kallan face. It wasnt the size or the numbers that were particularly alarming; it was the weapons that they held. Having those indicated not only intelligence but also skills. Fighting them would be the same as fighting other awakened.

As they stood, a large insect-like creature emerged from their ranks. Completely black, it had the appearance of a giant wingless mosquito.

Is that what's troubling you, Nox? Dallion whispered.

Based on the cubs reaction, it wasn't, although Nox still didn't like it. That made things slightly more complicated. The insect was likely some sort of crack, though in that case, how had it teamed up with the goblins? Not only that, but there was something even worse hiding in the item.

Get closer together, Vend whispered to the group. If they attack, we form a circle and stand our ground. If they don't engage, we keep going.

Pick up the pace, Spike said from behind. But don't run.

Everyone went towards one another. Dallion could feel that quite a few people were eager to test their strength against the creatures, and possibly get noticed in the process. Several, the more experienced ones, wanted the exact opposite. Dallion himself was undecided. While he wanted to get to fight, Nox's reaction worried him.

Meanwhile, more and more goblins gathered in the distance. Within minutes there were close to two dozen, with several of the mosquito creatures as well. If there was a time they would attack, it had to be now. A few seconds later they didn't disappoint, charging at the group like an avalanche.

Keep on walking! Vend shouted, drawing his weapon. Guard only!

COMBAT INITIATED

As the wave of creatures got closer, information rectangles appeared above them.

Species: Crimson Goblin

Class: Earth

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

- Acid burn

Weak spot: Base of neck

Almost in sync, Vend and Spike darted towards the enemies, while everyone else from the party summoned their shields. Dallion felt the load he was carrying decrease, and it didn't seem like only shields were vanishing.

A cat's cradle of red lines emerged between the goblins and Vend, indicating a multitude of possible attacks. It seemed more than likely that the party leader would dispatch half of the goblins, yet would also end up being wounded in the process. That would leave the rest of the party to fend for itself.

Suddenly Vend disappeared. It was unlike any skill that Dallion had seen. He has spent quite a while in the library learning the basics of all nine known skills, and this didn't have the markings of any. Could it be that it was one of the three missing ones?

Before Dallion could get his answer, Vend appeared again in immediate proximity to one of the goblins. Multi-colored markers appeared, creating patterns throughout the area. Dallion could recognize the red and green for attack and defense. That left white and orange.

He's combining four skills, Dallion whispered, impressed by the sight.

Not only that, but each of the skills was at a level exceeding Dallions. Thats why he didnt recognize what had happened. The vanishing had to be either athletics or acrobatics. As for the rest

Vend wasnt the only one engaged in battle. While most of the attention remained glued on him, Spike had gone to deal with an equally large group attacking from the other side. In all the commotion of the initial attack, no one had noticed that another group of goblins had lain in wait, charging at just the right moment when the party was unprepared. Alas for them, an elite guild member proved more than enough to deal with them.

While not as flashy as Vend, Spikes style of fighting was equally effective. Armed with a triangular sword, the man bashed through his enemies with one strike, aiming at their heads. The strength of the blow alone was enough to crack a goblins skull, causing the creature to poof out of existence instantly. If Vend had the approach of a scalpel, Spike had that of a hammer. In both cases the goblin threat had been quickly eliminated, however that didnt prove to be enough. Taking advantage of the goblins diversion, a third group of creatures had made its way towards the main group.

Species: Soul Sucker

Class: Crippled Star

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills: Unknown

Weak spot: Unknown