

Leveling up 141

Chapter 141: Grey Harbor

Are you sure about this? Dallion asked.

When Jiroh had said he might have to go through a lot to reclaim his stolen gear, he didnt think this was what she had in mind. He had suspected it might be dangerous, risky even, but he didnt think that the plan would involve storming a tavern of awakened in one of the shadiest parts of Nerosal, to be precise it was part of the city in name only. It turned out that there were two neighborhoods located outside of the city limits beyond the walls. One of these places, known as Grey Harbor, was in fact a remnant of the war. Located on one of the large rivers that provided water to the city, it was composed of a series of docks, warehouses, and taverns, with the occasional fishermans shack in-between. Technically, there was a large guard outpost located a few miles away, but as Dallion had been told, they were there exclusively to guard against creatures from the wilderness and didnt bother with dealings that transpired in the neighborhood. Not that was the cause of Dallions concern, though. Since the group Jiroh had gathered was vastly outnumbered, the plan was to swim to the tavern that his attacker was believed to be at, and attack.

Dallion was perfectly alright with the attacking part of the plan. The swimming, though not so much.

Theres nothing to be ashamed about. Euryale smiled. Were all grownups here.

Thats not what Im worried about. Dallion replied. I dont know how to swim. Not to mention he was terrified of doing so. Are you sure shes there?

No doubt about it. A cluster of the gorgons snakes stretched in the direction of the tavern. Shes there alright and so is your harpsisword. It seems to be attracting a lot of interest. I cant see the shield, though.

Dallion felt a block of ice form in his stomach. He was worried about what could have happened to the dryad guardian, just as he was terrified of what might happen to him when the general finds out that hed lost his shield. Hopefully, the item was just out of sight and not sold or bartered.

Youre an awakened. Just hold your breath and Ill pull you all the way there.

The offer was outright humiliating, but sadly, Dallion knew he had no other choice. At this moment he was almost glad that Jiroh hadnt managed to find Vend while forming their small assault team. Unfortunately, she had convinced Spike and Grunt to come along. Dallion had no idea how she had managed, but apparently her relations with the guild went way back. For that matter, Eury also seemed well known by the guild, despite making it a point that shes unchained, which meant not associated with any organization.

Grunt can always throw you here. Spike smirked. Looking at him, it was difficult to tell whether he was being literal or not. From the little Dallion had seen of the man, he was the sort of type that loved getting into fights. Possibly that was the reason he had agreed to join in so easily.

In the end its up to you. Jiroh turned to Dallion. Its a forty-minute swim there. If you dont think you can manage, just say so and well call this thing off.

That was the crux of the matter. Dallion wanted to get his gear back, he wanted it very much, but his fear of water paralyzed him, even with all the adrenalin in his veins. A sneaky voice in the back of his mind had already started whispering that it wasn't worth it to drown for a few weapons. Even if the armadil shield belonged to the general, he could still claim it as his once he fulfilled the canes destiny. Or he could keep paying three gold every month until the end of his days, provided the general allowed it.

Alright, Dallion said, his body still fighting the thought.

I'll do it. Dallion's voice sounded more melodic than before, conveying the sense of joy in it. I've gotten this far, so I'll go to the end.

The blue hue of joy flickered before his eyes. Dallion looked down at his chest to see a small grape-sized blob resonate with the feeling. It wasn't much, but it was a start. The irrational fear had gone, and with it the reluctance of swimming. He still didn't know how to, but he knew that thanks to his body level he could manage to stay in water for long enough.

Good. The fury nodded. Just remember no sharp object when we get there. We're not turning this into a war.

And if they don't follow those rules? Spike asked, his voice resonating with hope they wouldn't.

Leave that to me. Euryale rubbed her hands. Now let's get going.

The water was quite cold, but Dallion didn't mind it. His endurance had grown on par with his senses. He would have preferred it to be warmer and cleaner, but he could definitely tolerate it. The rest seemed the same. The gorgon was the only exception; she appeared to love the chill, taking her time entering the river, savoring every moment. She was the one who would pull Dallion to the tavern. The only thing he had to do was hold his breath and not struggle.

Forty minutes. That was the amount of time Jiroh had said the swimming would last. Given the speed at which everyone propelled forward, Dallion could assume that the tavern was quite a distance away. That was somewhat surprising; he had expected the mirror pool to be closer to the city walls so as to come and go as quickly as possible. Instead, they were in one of the furthest parts of the neighborhood.

The silence during the swim was almost unnatural. Only now did Dallion realize how used to the shield he had gotten. Normally not a moment would pass without the dryad guardian asking for something, cracking a joke, or making inappropriate comments. It had become part of the background, if sometimes annoying.

After ten minutes Dallion noticed with astonishment that he didn't feel the need for air. True, he hadn't put in a lot of effort; being pulled like a rag-doll but even so, this was beyond normal. From what he had remembered, the world record back on Earth was about twenty minutes. If that was a

guideline, he could easily last over an hour without taking a breath. Given the clear advantage the awakened had, he pictured what it would be like if a few managed to find their way back home. For one thing, professional sports would be a lot more boring.

Three quarters of an hour later, Eury slowed her pace. Even in the murky water, Dallion could see the wooden pier pilings. If Jiroh was correct, the tavern had to be right above.

Euryale pulled Dallion closer, then let him go. To his surprise, he didn't sink, remaining at his current depth. A quarter of the gorgon's snakes turned his direction, after which she made him a sign to hold still.

One by one, the rest of the group arrived at the spot. None of them were armed, although Dallion could never be certain about Spike. All attention was focused on Euryale, who then gave a sign it was alright to surface, and so everyone did.

The air was thick and smelly, making Dallion want to go back underwater. Alcohol mixed with the rest of the smells, masking the more terrible parts.

No one said a word even though they could. Doing so near other awakened was too risky, even when special whispering was used. All they could do was follow the plan. After a single nod, Jiroh went back underwater, swimming off. The rest split up into two groups heading towards different parts of the pier. The moment of truth was at hand.

Dallion and the gorgon formed the group that was to enter by the side entrance of the tavern. With a single fluid action, Euryale pulled herself out of the water, climbing up the piling. Once there, she took the rope round her waist and threw it to Dallion. He grabbed it and waited to be pulled up.

There was no point being silent now, all that was of significance was speed. It was the plan for Dallion to enter first. Being the least experienced of the group, and unable to hide his presence, his role was to attract as much attention as possible, making it easier for the rest of the group to engage in a surprise attack.

The inside of the tavern was very different from the outside. The floor, walls, and tables were in flawless condition. There were no stains, pieces of broken glass, or even specks of dirt anywhere. Several pots of incense burned, filling the whole place with a pleasant aroma. Judging by the smell, even the spirits were top shelf.

Initially Dallion was taken aback, but considering this was a hideout for awakened, it made sense. No awakened would suffer in filth unless forced to, especially in their hideout.

The moment he entered, all eyes turned his direction. Looking around, though, Dallion couldn't make out any of the faces. He knew that he had seen them, but a fraction of a second later, the image disappeared from his mind.

Dis-focus

, he thought. Still, that wasn't the only means through which to identify someone.

The silence was complete. For several seconds no one made a sound, determining whether this was a joke. Normally people didn't just enter into a mirror pool hideout, let alone demand things. Several of the people glanced out of the windows to check whether there was a squad of city guards outside. Upon seeing none, they directed their attention back to the intruder.

Didn't you get enough this morning? a familiar voice asked.

Apparently not. Dallion smiled. Part of the plan was for him to act as arrogant as possible, which to a degree came naturally. His words made several people stand from their seats. One even reached for a dagger.

Not a good idea, Euryale said, standing behind Dallion. If you really want to play, I'll play. Do you want me, though?

Yeah, we're just here to have a word. Spike came in from the main entrance, followed by Grunt, who made the door seem small. Well, a bit more than a word.

Coming to visit with a gorgon hunter, a bald man, all in tattoos, said from behind the bar counter. Unlike everyone else, his face was memorable. If Dallion were to guess, that made him the tavern owner or a person of importance, possibly even a mirror aristocrat. You're a long way from your shop, threat forger.

People keep telling me that, the smile was audible in Euryale's voice.

What do you want?

Oh, nothing. I just don't like it when someone ruins something I've made. I put a lot of effort into that shirt and I wanted to see the face of the person who shredded it.

The tension increased. Dallion could see the fear in the room fade away, replaced by eagerness. It was no longer a matter of if there was going to be a brawl, rather it was more a matter of when.

Just so you know, dis-focus doesn't work on me. The gorgon turned her face in the direction of the thief.

There was a sudden blur. The thief disappeared from her seat near Dallion's harpsichord only to appear an instant later beside the gorgon, knife in hand. Euryale had also shifted position, taking a defensive stance, her snakes keeping a good look at the entire room and every person in it. Both had lightning-fast reflexes and the unwillingness to back off.

Good reflexes, Euryale said. But you're not awakened.

I don't have to be awakened to deal with you. A second knife flashed in her left hand. Before she could strike, though, a new hand suddenly appeared in the air, snatching the knife away with ease.

And what about me? Jiroh asked, holding the weapon.

Chapter 142: Barroom Blitz

No single incident started the brawl. One moment everyone was on edge, watching the two furies exchange blows faster than even the average awakened could see. Then, a second later, everyone joined in the brawl. It was just like the song that Dallions father constantly listened to: it was like lightning, and everybody was frightening. Each could probably take out Dallion without a second thought, and thats precisely why no one bothered to.

Under normal circumstances five people would have little chance against thirty. However, a gorgon changed the math drastically. She was, after all, the greatest threat capable of petrifying the entire tavern with as little as a glance. As a solution, half a dozen people rushed her direction, aiming to overpower her. All avoided looking her way while doing so.

With a single action, Euryale shoved Dallion forward out of danger, as kicks, punches, and sweets rained down upon her. Each series of attacks was precise to a fault, although here was when the lack of teamwork started to show. While each of the awakened were skilled in their own right, they rarely had to fight together, especially against someone that could handle their attacks. What the gorgon didnt evade, she redirected, causing several of the attackers to hit their friends in their attempt to take her down. This only tended to infuriate them by making further mistakes, which were quickly taken advantage of.

An attack was briskly grabbed by the arm and shoulder, then spun around like a weapon and slammed on the wooden floor. The sound was thundering, but because of his improved body, the man only let out a groan as the fighting continued above him.

Meanwhile, Spike and Grunt had also joined into the fray. Spike was the first to do so, naturally. The scrawny human not only looked like the caricature of a last century punk rocker but also fought in similar fashion. There could be no doubt he had been through this a lot and took pleasure in it. Unlike the gorgon, he received as many hits as he let out, although still managing to keep on his feet. A few steps away, Grunt stood like an unmovable wall, slowly pushing into the gathering group of people who continued with their futile attempts to stop him. Their kicks and punches practically bounced off the body of the giant while he swatted them like flies.

This was the first time that Dallion had witnessed Grunt fight. The large man was much faster than his speed suggested. His opponents werent slackers either, avoiding the blows or getting back up into the fight if they werent.

The sight was mesmerizing. Part of Dallion wanted just to remain here and watch the scene. However, that wasnt the plan. While their skills were vastly superior to Dallions, most of the awakened in the tavern were small frythieves, pickpockets, and the occasional bruiser. Even with their numbers, it would be difficult for them to do any serious harm. There were six, seven people at most, who were seriously strong. Jiroh had speculated that none of the strong ones would join in the fight with one exceptionthe fury. In truth, the name of the species wasnt only for show. So far Dallions only contact to the species had been Jiroh and the generals servants. Looking at the fierce exchange of attacks, he could only be thankful he hadnt caught one on her bad side. The entire incident of this morning might well have been because he had pissed her off. Quite likely it hadnt even been because of the money, but rather about his refusal to hand it over.

Using his guard skills, Dallion made his way to the spot where the fury had been sitting. The harpsisword was still there, as was the shield. The moment he took hold of the weapon, though, he felt someones gaze upon him.

Youre lucky, kid, the tattooed man said, as he poured what smelled like bourbon. Two hunters started all this just so you could get back your trash.

Dallion paused for a moment. In his mind, he was picturing how a fight against the man at the bar would go. Should he attack, or just grab his gear and run?

Try it and youre dead, the man said with such determination that Dallion felt shivers down his spine. Take your scrap and go. And pray that we don't cross paths again.

There was no malice in his words, just a matter-of-fact statement. Dallion could tell the man was strong, possibly stronger than anyone here. If he wanted, he could have killed Dallion where he stood, and still he was letting him go?

As the saying went, never look a gift horse in the mouth. Grabbing the shield and harpsisword, Dallion then rushed towards the main exit. Barely had he taken a few steps away, when Spike leapt over the bar, aiming to kick the bald man in the head.

The attack was lightning fast, and yet it was deflected with such ease that one would say that Spike had been standing still.

You sound like a big shot, the scrawny man laughed as he swirled, doing a series of lower and upper sweeps.

With just as little effort as before, the other used his left hand to block the attacks, still holding his glass of alcohol. Not a single drop was spilled. Before Spike could start his next attack, the tattooed man gulped down what was left of the drink, then effortlessly split the glass in two perfect halves.

Third gate? the man asked, somewhat impressed. And still not of the five.

Using the glass parts as knives, the man slashed at Spike. The Icepicker instantly twisted, bending backwards so as to evade the arc of attack, though that didnt save him. One of the edges manages to graze his left biceps, leaving a red line behind. The wound didnt seem deep, but the fact that it was there at all made Spike jump back up and to the other side of the bar counter where he kicked up a chair from the floor and smashed it to bits with a single strike. Thenwhile the two pieces were still in the airhe grabbed a leg with each hand.

The tattooed man didnt let him gain the initiative, continuing with a series of attacks aimed at Spikes throat. Glass met wood and despite the generally perceived notions, glass won, shaving off wooden splinters as if the man was carving. Then it hit Dallion: the tattooed man was combing, carving and attack skills.

Dallion was a less than five steps away from the exit. Grunt was keeping the area clear, remaining the focus of most attackers.

At the same time, Spike was being pushed back. The smile remained on his face, but it was clear to everyone that he had been outclassed, even to the point that the few people remaining in their seats at the bar counter didn't bother to assist in the battle. All of them were standing observing the events with near boredom, occasionally glancing about.

Then suddenly, a large pop filled the air, as if the air pressure suddenly shifted. Instantly, the fighting stopped. Everyone's attention focused on Jiroh, who was holding a knife to the other furs throat. Judging by the expressions, the fight was over and Jiroh had won.

There's no point in going on, Jiroh said, calmly. We go our way, you go yours.

That's not how it works, hunter, the tattooed man said, slapping both of the glass pieces together. For a moment it almost seemed as if he were holding a whole glass. Even for you.

You took of mine. Jiroh narrowed her eyes.

You broke into my house instead of asking.

I'll owe you one.

There was a moment of silence. The offer was made and now it was time for the man to respond. For a brief moment all eyes turned his way in anticipation. Even Euryale had focused half the snakes in that direction.

One of three, he said at last. And you keep what is yours.

Deal. Jiroh removed the knife from the thief's throat, then made a sign for the rest of her group to head outside. As for you. She turned to the other fury. I don't know you and I don't care. Step foot on my territory again and I'll know. Jiroh dropped the knife on the floor and started her way out as well.

Still, I must wonder why would two hunters go through all this for a pup? the tattooed man asked as Jiroh passed by.

That's because hunters see potential, Euryale replied in a normal tone of voice. I thought you already knew that.

I do now.

Nothing more was said. The awakened in the tavern remains still, waiting for Jiroh and her group to leave, and they did. It was only when they were outside that Dallion allowed himself to exhale. There was a moment inside in which he wasn't sure that he would survive.

Did you get everything you needed? Jiroh asked.

Yeah.

Technically Dallion hadn't reclaimed the money that was stolen, but he had no plan to go back inside to ask for it. Besides, everything considered, things had ended pretty much as perfect as one could hope for.

That was the longest minute of my life, he said after a while. Do we need to swim back again?

That's the fastest way. But I guess we can walk a bit. You'll still need to get the rest of her clothes.

Of course they would. The fury was the only one that didn't seem affected by water. She had gone into the river fully dressed and still remained dry the moment she had gone out of it. For some reason Dallion suspected that there was more to her species than what he'd read in the library scrolls.

We'll be heading off to the guildhall, Spike said. If anyone was upset that the fighting hadn't lasted longer, it was him. Let me know if there's something else to help out with.

I will. Jiroh smiled. Thanks for the help, Spike.

And Dal, next time, take better care of your gear. Your gear is your family.

Gear was an awakened's family. Such a simple concept that Dallion had missed all that time only because he didn't bother speaking with it. It was only thanks to the shield that Dallion had gotten a sense of that, and ironically also because of the shield he had neglected his other items more.

Spoke walked along the muddy path of the bank, along with Grunt.

I have something to do as well, Jiroh said. Euryll take you back to the inn. Get some sleep in the awakened realm. It's better that Hannah doesn't see you in such a state.

Jiroh, he began. I've a question.

The fury looked at him.

What exactly is a hunter? You've never mentioned it before, and you never talk about your life outside the inn.

That's because Hannah doesn't want me scaring off customers. There was no telling whether she was lying or not. Dallion chose to believe that she wasn't. Hunters are what it sounds like. We go into the wilderness and kill creatures that shouldn't exist. Most of the time it's boring, but every now and again something really scary appears. Like a chainling, for example.

Like a chainling? Once a person had fought one, no further explanations were necessary. It was almost like people who had been part of an unspoken club. Dallion's hunt had lasted a week and during that time he had set eyes on the creature for a few minutes, but he could never forget the experience. Was this why the fury had been so nice to him? Because of the unspoken bond they shared?

Thanks both of you.

You know, you're really cute when you're being serious. Euryale put her arm round his shoulders. It's all good, though. We take care of our own. Just try not to get in too much trouble next time?

Ill try not to.

Chapter 143: Conditional Help

After the last of the evening clients had gone, Dallion was back in his room. It was the same as every night. His head was cleaned and put away, Dallions clothes were carefully folded with the exception of the armor shirt that was at Eury for mending the floor was meticulously cleaned, and the sheets of the bed straightened. The only major difference was that now Dallion was back to having forty-three silver coins and no level increase to show for it.

Life was so much like a roller coaster. Yesterday he felt unstoppable, wondering what secondary skill to choose once he passed his double-digit trial. After that everything had gone wrong. Well, not everything; Jiroh had helped him get his gear back and granted his protection. The wound he had received was little more than a scar, thanks in part to the level of his awakened body. Everything else, though the trial, the mugging, had given him pause to think.

Heh. Dallion remained on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Today had been another well-deserved kick in the ass. While still shaking on the inside, he was also grateful for the reminder. Funny enough, todays revelations didnt seem to hit him as hard as when he had failed the selection exam. Was that an indication that he was getting used to this world? Or just that he was maturing? Probably both.

Do you think I have potential? Dallion asked.

Wow. Didnt expect that question to come from you.

Im serious.

Okay, but usually when someone starts that way, they have something very different in mind. Not that I would have minded, just you dont seem the type.

Shield

Hmm.

Why do I feel thats bothering you for some reason?

Its not. Im just wondering why Jiroh and Eury are keeping an eye out for me. And not only today, theyve helped me many times before. If I were to pay them back, it would take me the rest of my lifetime.

And thats a bad thing? I used to dream of that. In fact, I lived through that. Those were the days I could do whatever I wanted and not worry about money. At worst, Id have to resort to alternative payment methods.

Is that another of the things you cant tell me until I become a double digit?

No, I really have no idea why she has her eye on you. Youve got potential, no doubt, but youre not that extraordinary. Ive seen geniuses in my day Ive even seen a few in that dreaded collection room. Youre not them. Youre just quite good. You keep making lots of mistakes, forgetting things that you should know by now. All in all, your progress is typical of a late bloomer: ups and downs like a wave. Didnt you ask the echo?

Dallion smirked. For some reason, the shield kept referring to nil as the echo. Apparently, he didnt like echoes much. From the perspective of a guardian, they probably were like guests one couldnt get rid of. On that note, maybe it wouldnt be a bad idea to have a chat with the guardian of the library ring at some point.

Not yet. I wanted to hear your thoughts first. Youre older, Dallion added, fully aware that Nil was listening in.

There were hunters in your day?

Its a given that there always are hunters. Just like cracks appear in items and buildings, they also appear in areas. Given enough neglect, they even manage to break out. Thats where the hunters come in.

Dont think about it too much. Youll live a much happier life if you accept the world for what it is, and not delve into complex matters too much.

Thats some terrible advice.

Definitely terrible, but its also true. Ive seen scholars argue about the nature of awakened powers for decades. Wars almost started because of that. And in the end everything remains just as unclear. Take you for example. There was a theory that humanityall species in factwere only those that managed to crawl out of an area into the wilderness, and its been trying to take us back ever since.

Really? Dallion sat up.

Thats what Im telling you. No one knows. Maybe its true, maybe its not. No one knows exactly what the creatures in the wilderness are, just that they want to destroy everything thats not them.

So, youve no idea. Dallion lay back down.

The conversation ended there. Skilling his library training for the first time in a while, Dallion went to sleep. Even with all his awakened improvements, the events of the day had exhausted him to the point he wanted a normal night of sleep. By the time he woke up, it was already mid-noon. And with dawn, a new day began.

Splashing some water on his face, Dallion quickly ran down to the toilet, then after he was done, washed up and had a bite. Maybe because of yesterdays events, Aspan had outdone himself again, making a dish that Dallion hadnt tasted before. The only way he could describe it was a mix between a porridge and a smoothie with crackers inside. Definitely unique and uniquely delicious.

Once done, Dallion had a quick chat with Estezols echowhom hed named Estywhether there were any jobs at the guild that could use him. As it turned out, there were two, one with Janna and Kellan, as well as one more with a party Dallion hadnt heard of before.

Dallion rushed to get his gear, then with a quick bye to Hannah, he rushed to get the job done before it was time for lunch.

All in all, it was just like resetting a game: he might have failed a scenario, but he always could start again from the last save point.

Things at the guild were pretty normal. No one had any idea about the incident that had taken place, or the way through which Dallion had retrieved his gear. Upon arrival, Estezol prepped the exploration room while another of his echoes conveyed the information to the siblings. The pair came soon enough and with that the word day started a five-level earring, which had been half cleared by another group.

Hearing that the previous team had quit halfway made Dallion slightly anxious. However, after reaching the midway point, he found that there was nothing to worry about. The guardians were pretty standard, it was the levels that were incredibly large and twisted, though after the rescue operation, Dallion found the whole experience like a walk in the park.

Three of the guardians were such that he had already seen, and just as before, he left Janna and Kellan to take care of them without getting in the way. Instead, he did what he was paid to do assist and learn. It was amazing how much things became clearer when Dallion didnt constantly speculate how he would have defeated it faster. For one, it turned out that the siblings were also using predefined patterns. Up till now, Dallion had thought that their battlers were a combination of combat experience, quick thinking, and lightning reflexes. Seeing them in action so many times, he came to the conclusion that everything they did was carefully planned.

They always started in the same way a quick dash towards the enemy, with four distinct variations. It was exactly like an opening chess move. Then they would perform two probing attacks, sometimes in zig-zag fashion, before choosing a finishing attack. Even when facing guardians they would open in a specific fashion based on what they were facing. The only exception was the Mirror Widow. The crystal beetle was something that none of them had fought on their own, thus why the confusion in tactics when facing it the first time.

With the success of the job came the obligatory time for celebration. However, on this occasion, Dallion had to skip it. About half an hour remained until the start of his shift at the tavern, way too little for him to spend eating here. However, before he left, there was one thing that he wanted to do.

Estezol? he approached the short bearded man. Any idea of Falkner is here?

At the guild? Not today. He only comes here from time to time. Why?

I wanted to talk with him about something. Any idea where I can find him?

His mentor does, although shes not here either. If you want, Ill tell him you want to see him, but theres no telling when hell check his emergency ring.

Please do.

There was no downside. Even if Falkner didnt hear the request today, there was a chance that he would tomorrow.

Thanks, Estezol. Ill be heading to the inn now.

Say hi to Jiroh for me.

Will do.

A gold coin and a half that was the reward for successfully clearing the sphere item. Any other day Dallion be glad at the sum, but right now it seemed so small. He would have to keep doing missions for two weeks in order to make up for the money he lost. Even so, it was part of the process.

Whos the more foolish the fool or the one whos carried by him?

That one was actually good. Congratulations, youre actually getting better. It doesnt change the facts, though.

Ill just see if I can take advantage of an offer that was made. Thats all.

You dont sound too convincing.

Its not like Ill lose anything. If it doesnt work, it doesnt work. And if

Dal? a familiar voice interrupted. Standing a dozen feet away was no other than Falkner himself. You were looking for me?

If there were any doubts that the meeting was coincidental, they were now gone. Still, it was impressive how Falkner had managed to get here so fast. Running was out of the question, and Dallion didnt know any other method except if Falkner had magic skills.

You got here fast. Dallion decided to be subtle about his request.

I was on my way here, anyway. There werent any good jobs, so I was going to ask my mentor for something different.

Dallion could clearly tell that the boy was lying. Since he was the one who was going to ask a favor, he didnt point it out.

What did you need me for? Falkner asked again.

Curiosity filled the boy. Dallion could almost see questions forming in his mind.

Whats it for?

My awakening trial. I was thinking of going to a shrine this afternoon to reach level ten, and afterwards, who knows?

You want to become a double digit? The curiosity was replaced by awe.

I have to catch up to you, dont I? Dallion added a little flattery, while changing the pitch of his voice slightly so that Falkner would feel happy to help.

Im just at ten. Im not ready to go through the second gate, yet. Anyway, will fifty gold be enough?

The temptation for Dallion to accept was huge, yet he managed to keep himself from doing so. That was a lot of money and would no doubt come with a lot of strings attached.

Tens fine.

Ten? I can give you that much now.

Dallions heart skipped a beat. There were about twenty-five minutes till the start of his shift. If he ran, he could reach the nearest awakening shrine and get back to the inn in that time.

Id appreciate that, Dallion replied, then stopped using his skill. Even in the awakening world, it was exhausting.

Without hesitation, Falkner took out his pouch and counted ten gold coins. From what Dallion was able to glimpse, there were many more from where those came from.

Here. The boy handed him the coins. Ive got a condition, though.

I want to be with you when you complete the trial.

Chapter 144: Guardian's Fear

The city of Nerosal had experienced much during its existence. Long before the succession wars, back when it was a small hamlet between domains, people used to go there to smuggle, trade, or settle duels without fear of breaking laws or arrangements. As it grew into a city, it changed owners many times, but the principle remainedalmost anything was allowed in Nerosal, and as long as it didnt threaten the province or the empire, people didnt mind rules being bent or broken. That was one of the reasons that the awakened underground was allowed to exist, as long as they didnt stir things too much. It was also the reason why the Orders curates allowed two people to participate in the awakening trial, provided the right price was paid.

Falkner was all too happy to pay the twenty gold coins, despite already being at level ten. For that reason, as the curate explained, he would only be able to observe while Dallion proceeded with the trial. Given that they had already been together on two missions while at the guild, Dallion didnt see any logic, but that was what they had agreed to so At the end of the day it was Falkners money and he could do whatever he wanted with it.

Have you been to an awakening shrine before? the curate guiding them asked.

A few times back home, Dallion replied. It was very different from this, though.

The inside of the shrine was even more magnificent than the outside. The blue marble was covered in thousands of strange symbols, as if someone had attempted to recreate the script from the Matrix but ended up doing something much better.

Had the ruined awakening temple near Dherma looked like this once? If so, it had to have been centuries ago, at the very least. The main corridor broke into seven more, then into seven again, ending in a small chamber with an altar inside. As they were moving in, Dallion passed dozens of people, all awakened just as him. Each was escorted by a guide from the Order, dressed in cyan garments. Looking at them, Dallion thought about Cleric. Hopefully, the success of the hunt had made things easier for him. Or maybe he had been sent to help another noble track down some other beast of the wilderness. There was just no way of knowing.

You're allowed one attempt, the curate said with the tone of a bored bureaucrat. The attempt commences once you put both hands on the altar and awakened the item. You are allowed to take the observer with you, but he is only to observe. Breaking that rule will result in serious body harm.

Dallion arched a brow.

Err, I meant that the process will harm you, the curate quickly clarified. Also, it recommended that you don't use echoes. Every now and again the shrine ends the trial abruptly when there are echoes involved.

That was good to know. At least Dallion was warned not to rely on Nox during the trial.

Anything else? Dallion asked out of habit.

The question must have been quite unusual for this world, for both the curate and Falkner stared at him as if he had a booger hanging from his nose.

Err, no, nothing else, the curate explained. In all likelihood this was the most interesting thing he had seen all day, even if it was shocking for some reason. With a slight nod, he moved to the side, letting Dallion proceed.

Here. He offered Falkner his left hand.

When the boy grabbed hold of it, Dallion put his right hand in the central part of the altar. The realm around him changed.

You are in a medium Awakening shrine.

Complete the trial to improve your destiny.

Wow, Falkner said, even more bewildered than Dallion.

First time in one of these? Dallion couldnt help but ask.

Yeah. Its a real dump. You cant even see the sky properly. And the doorways the boy pointed in the distance theyre not even complete. I didnt know there were shrines like this in cities still.

Dallion felt so out of place. Maybe now was not a good time to mention that the shrine he had been to previously was a complete ruin.

How do you even know where to go? Falkner asked.

They change when you move closer.

Dallion stepped directly towards the column to his right. As expected, an arch formed with the letter X on it. The tenth trial. After this, he would have what it took to step through the gate and beyond his level cap.

You coming? Dallion looked over his shoulder.

Cant. Observers arent allowed to step through the doorways. Ill still be here watching, though. Dont worry about it.

Nice! Its the same as my trial, Falkner said from behind.

Dallion turned around and saw that the arch was still there, but more importantly, that Falkner could be seen behind him, as well.

Told you Ill still be here, the boy said with a smug smile. Now good luck. This one is a bit tricky.

Tricky Dallion looked at the sky, then at the ground beneath his feet. Given that there were no obvious enemies, it stood to reason that the creature, whatever it was, would either swoop down, or would emerge from the ground like a giant mole. Personally he hoped it would be the former; fighting moles sounded bothersome, not to mention there was no guarantee his music skills would work.

As far as he could tell, the only source of emotion was Falkner, pulsing with several blue spots in the chest and head. The ground and the meadow were completely emotionless, wrapped in a faint state of calm.

Are you sure there are no invisible guardians? Dallion gripped the hilt of his sword, ready to pull the strings at a moments notice.

I cant be sure of anything, but thats not it.

If there were no invisible guardians, then what could it be? Based on the logic of the past guardians, each guardian was part of the surrounding environment. The sand dragon was in a desert, the slime

was on an island given that Dallion was in a meadow, it was likely that the creature was either an earth elemental of some sword or something linked to plants.

Im ready, Dallion said loudly. What about you? Are you alright to start this trial?

The sound of a thousand rustling leaves filled the air. Blades of grass from up from the ground as if plucked by an invisible force, merging together like invisible knitting on a grand scale. After several seconds, Dallion took a step back. He had seen enough of the shape to recognize what he was about to facethe grass had formed the tip of a rather sharp and long horn.

A unicorn, Dallion said beneath his breath. Ill be facing a unicorn.

Close, Falkner shouted from beyond the archway. But yeah, pretty much youll be fighting that. Remember to keep your distance.

SHRINE GUARDIAN

Species: Bladicorn

Class: Earth

Statistics: 100 HP

Skills

- **Entangle**
- **Rain of blades**
- **Charge**

Weak spots: Hooves

Bit by bit the parts of the guardian came into existence. The rest of the head was firstfar larger than what Dallion had imagined it would befollowed by the neck, shoulders, legs, torso, and finally the tail. No doubt about it, the creature was majestic to the extreme, towering five feet above Dallion. Every part of the body was made of blades of glass merged in seamless fashion. Only the eyes appeared to be made of orange balls of light. Guided by the white rectangle, Dallion looked at the hooves. They were made entirely of hardened dirt.

I know a draw isnt an option, Dallion said as he attempted to use his music skills on the bladicorn. But maybe we can wish each other a good fight? All the attempts to put doubt in the guardian failed. It seemed that creatures could be impregnable against music skills the same way they could against blades.

Stomping on the ground before it, the creature nodded. At least that had gone well.

COMBAT INITIATED

Red and green markers appeared on the field, suggesting possible courses of action. If Nil were here, he would probably have advised Dallion to start with a double feign. Given the creatures size and reach, that was the optimal action to take, and so Dallion did precisely that. Several dozen feet from the charging bladicorn, he swirled to the left, then to the right, then to the left again. The speed at which he did that managed to confuse the guardian. Trying to move his horn to match Dallion, the creature gradually increased the swing until it could no longer target adequately. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, Dallion leaped in the opposite direction yet again. With a spin, he slammed the side of his enemy with his shield. There was a sound of crunching glass.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 500%

This was the first time Dallion had dealt a fatal blow. The difference between this weapon and the starting short sword was immeasurable. Even so, it quickly turned out that even such an attack had only decreased the bladicorns health by ten percent. While a good start, Dallion knew he couldnt rely on the same trick twice. From this point on, the guardian would be prepared.

A green semi-sphere appeared around Dallion. Without waiting to find out what was going on, he dashed in the opposite direction. Barely an instant later, blades of grass rained over a large part of the meadow like hail. The only difference was that they had the strength and sharpness of industrial nails.

It was obvious that defeating a level ten trial guardian wasnt going to be easy, but the creatures attitude was very much unlike that of almost any he had seen before, with the possible exception of the grand colossus. Even during the guild exploration jobs, the creatures were scary, sometimes outright terrifying, but they werent nearly as aggressive. The bladicorn was putting its all into this fight, as if its life depended on it. And it was at that point that it dawned upon Dallion.

Pausing for a moment, he smiled and uttered the words he never thought hed utter to a guardian.

Youre afraid of me.

Chapter 145: Lucky Break

Dallion played the strings that resonated with the guardians fear. Despite that, no marker appeared. There was no mistakethe bladicorn was completely immune to music. Maybe that was specific to the creature itself, or possibly it required a higher skill proficiency. Even so, Dallion wasnt worried.

Dripping the harpsisword with both hands, he spun the weapon and threw it in the direction of the beast. Unfortunately, the attack did far better in his mind than in practice. The strength was there, but not the aim, making the harpsisword miss its target by over two feet. It seemed that throwing wasnt considered an attack skill. To be reliably successful, he was going to have to master athletics. With luck, that could happen at the end of this battle.

Without hesitation, Dallion drew his dartbow and aimed for the bladicorns front hoof. Holding his breath, he squeezed the trigger twice. Two bolts propelled forward, both of them stopped by a torrent of grass upon approaching the creature.

Nice save. Dallion tossed the weapon to the ground, then reached for the sheath on his back. As expected, the harpsisword had emerged there again. Close combat it is, then.

The guardian snorted, digging into the ground before it with a hoof. It was clever enough not to attempt another attack, giving the initiative to Dallion. As soon as he moved forward, though, blades of grass filled the air.

Shield! Dallion extended the armadil shield forward. The metal segments extended, providing full protection from the ranged attack. Once the metallic rattling stopped, the shield reverted back to its standard form.

Battle stances went through his mind. Attacking from a distance was useless, so the only alternative was for Dallion to charge forward, to provoke the guardian into action.

Odds were that the bladicorn would either retreat or launch another wave of blades. After several steps, it appeared to be the former. With a sudden turn, the guardian galloped off, increasing the distance between them. That didnt discourage Dallion, though. Determined to see his attack through, Dallion pressed on, running as fast as his legs would let him. His speed wasnt enough to catch up to the creature, but kept the distance from increasing too rapidly.

If this were Earth, humans were capable of outrunning any animal. Here, things werent so clear. Even so, after a minute the bladicorn launched another wave of glass projectile behind it. This was what Dallion was waiting for. On the surface, the sharp green projectiles seemed ideal for wounding enemies from a distance, they also provided an opportunity for Dallion to use his guard skills.

Before the markers could appear, he held his shield in front, protecting the entire upper half of his torso.

MINOR WOUND

Your health was reduced by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Your health was reduced by 5%

A few blades pierced Dallions right leg, but that wasnt of significance; he had managed to complete the sequence, reaching the first-time freeze. Taking advantage of the fact, Dallion leapt forward, starting his second sequence.

Each guard sequence for him closer to the guardian, while also increasing the distance he could leap to while time was being slowed down. After his fifth uninterrupted success, the familiar green rectangle appeared.

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to escape combat, smash the window.

Escaping, however, was not on Dallions mind. Instead, he used the time stop to breach the gap between him and the guardian and swing at its damaged hoof.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 500%

LEG SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its LEFT BACK LEG.

Time returned to normal. Before Dallions eyes, the hoof of the guardian grumbled to dust, and that was not all. The mass of leaves that made up the entire leg twisted apart like a box of spilled spaghetti. Only when they reached the torso of the creature did the disintegration stop. That was so unexpected that for a moment, Dallion let down his guard, wondering whether that wouldnt be enough to defeat the guardian. That turned out to be a costly mistake.

The bladicorn had no intention of letting Dallion destroy its leg for free. With a violent twist, it slammed its horn into the human. For an instant Dallion felt as if he had run into a slab of concrete. It was only through the quick reaction of his armadil shield that he didnt suffer any action wounds. Even with that protection, the attack knocked the air out of his chest, throwing him twenty feet away.

LUCKY BREAK

Sometimes luck is enough to get you out of a tight spot. However, dont tempt fate or at some point that all the luck youve gained will be taken away from you.

You dont say

, Dallion thought, struggling to take a breath. In any other circumstances this might have marked the end of the fight and if this were real life, the end of Dallions life as well. Taking a few moments, Dallion lowered the shield. The guardian glared at him, breathing just as heavily.

At first glance, Dallion had the clear advantage. He still had ninety percent of his health back, while the bladicorn was at sixty-five and only had three legs remaining. A few moments later, that no longer was the case. Leaves sprouted down from its body, making up the missing limb. Unlike the other three, this one didnt end in a hoof of earth.

Way to go, Dal! Falkner shouted. You can do it!

Dallion blinked. He had completely forgotten about the boy. Somewhat embarrassed, he glanced to his right. The archway was there, as if following Dallion as he moved about.

Just great, Dallion hissed beneath his breath. Sorry about that. He turned to the guardian. Wasnt my idea to have the fight public.

Its alright, the guardian replied to Dallions astonishment. Its not the first time.

Had that just happened? This wasn't the first time Dallion had heard guardians speak, but in this case, he wasn't expecting it. The bladicorn had counted on that, for it launched a new series of blades. This time it was a single spread, preventing Dallion from using them to approach too much. It was a clever move, though ultimately futile. The armadil shield gave Dallion a considerable advantage, and even without it, he could have suffered only a few minor wounds had he relied on his standard evasion abilities.

The moment Dallion tried dashing forward, he noticed that he couldn't. The blades previously shot at him had managed to entangle his feet to the ground. The guardian was careful not to allow any contact, instead creating a few inches in front of Dallion's feet. Only after the first step had the blades tightened, effectively pinning him down in place.

Clever move, Dallion said. Since this wasn't an attack, there had been no defense markers. Now Dallion was a sitting duck. Quite a good plan. However, there was one major flaw. Shield, surround me, Dallion said without a moment of hesitation.

The order was obeyed on the second. The shield's segments stretched once more, surrounding Dallion like a ball. Once that was done, Dallion had only to do one thing: lean forward.

MEDIUM WOUND

Your health was reduced by 10%

There was a slight amount of pain as the blades cut through Dallion's boots and into his skin, before snapping. An acceptable price to pay, considering it had set him free. What was more, now it was his turn to make the next move.

Dallion let the ball make a full roll before ordering the shield to open up. Right on time too. Seizing the opportunity, the guardian had already started its charge. Given the state of the shield, Dallion had no chance of blocking the attack, so he did the next best thing. Drawing his harpsichord, he swung against the creature's horn. There was a loud thud. The massive horn had changed state, allowing the place to sink into it.

The bladicorn's eyes glowed brighter. The creature rose up on its hind legs, throwing Dallion up into the air. Simultaneously, Dallion let go of the harpsichord and drew his dartbow. A single bolt targeted the guardian's front left hoof.

FATAL HIT

Dealt damage was increased by 500%

At this distance it was impossible to miss. The hoof fractures. Another bolt followed, shattering it to pieces.

FATAL HIT

Dealt damage was increased by 500%

LEG SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its LEFT BACK LEG.

Less than forty percent of health remained. Normally, Dallion would be suspicious of the ease with which he had dealt with so much damage. The voice of doubt kept whispering in the back of his mind that there had to be more to it. Surely this all had to be a trap.

Not this time, Dallion said, and targeted the remaining front hoof. And just to be certain, once the bolt had been launched, Dallion let go of the dartbow, drawing the harpsisword from its scabbard once more.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 500%

Even before the blade made contact, both participants knew that the battle was over. In that brief moment, a sense of achievement resonated in both. Dallion was pleased that he had managed to pass the trial; the bladicorn that it had helped him pass it. In the end, that was the purpose of the awakening shrine not only to determine who had the skills to continue on to the next level, but also display what the participant was lacking. The guardian had done everything it could to find a weakness it could exploit, and it had failed; or rather it had been slower to do so than Dallion.

Second by second, clusters of grass detached from the beast, floating slowly towards the ground. The front legs disappeared, then the head, the body, and finally the last hooved leg. The beautiful majestic creature that Dallion had faced was now reduced to a single cluster of grass in a clump of earth.

Thanks for the battle, Dallion said. He hoped he'd get a chance to see another guardian of that type at some point in the future. Hopefully, then he wouldn't have to fight it. For the moment, though, the trial held priority.

You have broken through your tenth barrier.

Finally, the coveted rectangle was there. For over ten seconds Dallion kept staring at it, savoring the moment. From now on he was technically a double digit, even if he had to pass the official trial.

You are level 10

Choose the focus you value the most.

The familiar five rectangles appeared underneath. To Dallion's pleasant surprise, all of his attributes, with the exception of mind, were at level ten, as were all his skills. The only other exception was the grey rectangle that remained, displaying five out of twenty. As much as Dallion wanted to invest more points there, the uneven number of visible attributes annoyed him to the point that he tapped on mind. Now he had ten everywhere, just like Falkner. However, one final step remained.

Chapter 146: Second Crossroads

That was impressive, Falkner said, as Dallion returned to the column space. I recognized some of the advances, but most of them were completely new. Where did you learn them?

If Nil was present, he would probably have choked to death, laughing at the question. The truth was that a large part of Dallions repertoire remained improvisation. As the library echo liked to say, his combat was more reaction than strategy. At times that helped, but it definitely was wasteful on the stamina side.

Not sure I can answer that. Dallion tried to sound mysterious about it. To his astonishment, it worked, because it got Falkner to not with a serious expression.

I understand what you mean, the boy whispered, moving closer. I wont say a word.

I know you wont. Dallion replied with a nod. For the moment, he was just happy that the ruse would stop the boy from asking further questions. How fast did you defeat it?

Oh, much longer. Father wanted me to be able to do it without losing any health, so I had to be very careful. But really, wow. Watching you fight it without using acrobatics was something. Most people without acrobatics fail when facing this guardian.

There are other guardians?

That was new. Back in the Dherma shrine, the guardians remained the same, no matter how many times one took the trial. Dallion knew all too well. At one point he had faced the Sandstorm dragon way too many times for his own good, only to be defeated each time. If there was a way for him to have faced something else, there was a chance he might have increased his level faster. Then again, the echo in his awakening room might have prevented him from doing that.

It depends on the shrines. Sometimes the guardians vary. Im not sure how its here, but back home there are three shrines that are different from the rest.

Good to know.

As Dallion made a step forward, the eleven columns glowed. The space between them filled upsimilar to what had happened in the last awakening shrine he had been inleaving a single one for him to pass.

Ill be leaving now, Falkner said with a note of fear in his voice. Thanks for letting me see the fight.

Wont you

Before Dallion could finish his sentence, the boy had vanished. That was untypical, although with the way awakening shrines worked maybe there was a reason for it. Just in case Dallion waited for a few seconds more. When nothing happened, he walked through the archway.

His surroundings changed again, although this time it wasnt a new landscape that appeared, but a tunnel. Looking back, Dallion could see all the way to the entrance area. Forward, though, was another matter. There didnt seem to be anything but darkness three steps back, as if the tunnel was forming as he walked.

Is there anyone out there? Dallion asked. There was no answer. Anyone out there who can hear me?

Yep, youre right there. A loud voice boomed.

A large hall emerged around Dallion. It was made entirely of stone with two massive fireplaces, red with flames. Two stone tables emerged from the ground, each covered with bronze candelabras. As far as Dallion could see, there were no chairs, any type of other furniture at all, as if the entity who made the hall was hinting that this wasnt a place in which mortals should remain for longer than they had to.

Youre right about that as well, a large bearded man clad in flowing red armor said. As he moved closer, Dallion could see that the mans hair and beard were also crimson red. If he had to make a guess, this had to be another of this worlds deities.

Centor? Dallion asked.

Maybe. The man smiled. Thats not the question that needs answering, though. And no, this wont be like your previous test. No trickery or mind games here, just a simple decision. Well, that and a few other things.

The red-haired clapped his hands. As he did, part of the wall melted, revealing a massive metal door.

That is the second gate. All you have to do to pass through is to open it.

Dallion looked at the gate, then back at the man. This was rather simple. It was too simple even, and in that lied its complexity. There had to be a catch somewhere.

Its not exactly a catch, the other said, reading his thoughts. As I said, you have to make the choice whether to continue or not. And dont worry, this isnt a one time thing. Should you choose, you can walk away and return in another few years. Some do, some dont.

Whats the choice?

Before I tell you, there is one more question. Do you really want to know?

Dallion blinked.

Any explanations I give you regarding the second gate you are to share only with people whove already gone through it. I believe youre aware of the principle?

All too well, Dallion thought. Several times so far, he had people tell him they can only talk about things that he already knew. Of course, in the case of his grandfather, he suspected that there was another reason.

How many have agreed, but then refused to continue the trial?

More than you think. The large man frowned. There is one more thing. All that hear the explanation are not to discuss this with anyone, including people who had passed through the gate. An additional cost, if you will.

And if they do?

There was a long moment of silence. The man who Dallion believed to be one of the Seven Moons remained still as a statue until finally he shrugged.

It depends, but in most cases, their awakened powers are sealed. Too harsh some would claim, but that's the bare minimum to show how serious this matter is. So, what is your first choice? Do you want an explanation or do you prefer to return later?

That was hardly a question. Dallion had come here with the intention of becoming a double digit. It was the one thing he had no doubt about. If he had, he wouldn't have taken the final step in the first place.

Go ahead.

Beyond this door lies the means for you to level up. You won't have to rely on awakening shrines to level up anymore, you might also be able to learn a few new abilities. Yes, I know you've been wondering which of the many abilities to choose. Pass through the door and you'll be given the chance to learn a few of them, maybe even more than a few. However, it also opens you up to danger.

Dallion swallowed. Inadvertently, his mind wondered what this danger could be.

No, everyone who's passed the gate won't become aware of your existence, the man sighed. There are too many double-digit awakened for any to take note. However, you will become a potential target for all of them. You see, up to now the Seven Moons protected your awakened room. Even with your permission a person cannot do any real damage, at least not many could. Once you walk through that door, all this would change. You would acquire the ability to enter people's awakening rooms and by doing so lose the protection you've had.

That was quite an interesting change. Sort of like entering a player combat area. It seemed like a simple enough rule and also explained why people had warned him not to share his awakened room with anyone else. The reason Kalis had been so adamant about it back during the chainling hunt was because he was a double-digit and had a lot to lose.

So, if I walk through I'll get new skills and powers?

Definitely. As I said, you'll be able to increase your level at will, not to mention skills. It will require some effort, of course.

And I have to do that now?

You only need to go through. You don't have to level up if you don't want to. It's only to confirm your choice. When you open the gate, you open it for everyone, not only yourself. And there's no closing it unless you get your powers sealed altogether.

So that was the catch. Technically, it was a choice, but it was a choice that one had to make in order to keep on growing. Delaying the decision was pointless, and from what Dallion could see, walking away was as well. Now the logical progression started to make sense: when one became an awakened they learned how to level up items; upon becoming a full awakened they could level up areas and make echoes of themselves; at double digits, they gained the ability to level up themselves and use echoes to protect themselves from the effects of others. Interesting what the next stage was going to be like?

And the level cap? Dallion asked.

The level cap remains at the next gate. When you reach it, you will know. Keep in mind, though, that awakening is a lot more difficult than it was until now. It won't be enough to find a shrine. You'll have to fight for every level.

I understand.

Oh? The man in glowing armor crossed his arms. In that case, open the door and proceed.

There didn't seem to be any more to it. Dallion hesitated for a few more moments, then walked to the massive gate and pushed. With a creak, the gate opened.

Looking inside, Dallion expected to see a vast and complicated maze filled with traps, creatures, and guardians to defeat. Instead, he found a single room with a blue rectangle floating in the middle.

You are Level 10

Confused, Dallion took a step forward. As he did, a small cat-like creature ran towards him from somewhere and started rubbing against his leg.

Welcome to your awakening room, the voice boomed once more.

Dallion turned around, only to see that the gate was gone. The wall was bare, just as it had always been.

From here on every level you want to gain, you must earn by defeating the traps and monsters in yourself, the voice continued. There are no maps or guides. Every level is made of you alone, and you make it as you clear it just as you did when you first appeared here.

Come along, Dallion told Nox, then hurried out into the corridor. From there he had the option to go to his arena chamber or the library room or so it had been until now. Dallion noticed that a new direction had been offered a corridor where a wall had been. Drawing his harpsisword, Dallion went down there.

The torches that used to light up the corridor were now replaced by lanterns. As expected, after a while Dallion reached a T-junction.

You are at a crossroads.

Choose the item that will serve you best.

Apparently, this was why every awakened received one more skill upon passing their double digit trial.

Athletics or acrobatics. Both were useful, and both could be easily combined with the skills Dallion had already mastered. Initially, acrobatics seemed the logical choice. He had seen others use it to perfection, as well as combine it with ranged weapons to become a lethal precision instrument in battle. However, would that be best suited for him? The man in red had said that he could acquire other skills. If that was true, it meant he had another option.

Both of these are cool, but they aren't the item that will serve me best, Dallion said.

The blue rectangle appeared once more. Dallion smashed it almost immediately, as it did.

I want my third option.

The blue rectangle appeared yet again, and was smashed out of existence yet again.

You say I'm at a crossroads. If that's so, why are you only giving me two paths instead of three?

Meow? Nox meowed, uncertain what Dallion was doing.

The blue rectangle emerged anew, only this time it was much darker. Dallion reached out to smash it again, but as he hit it, the rectangle flew back. Instead of breaking into pieces, it broke the wall, starting a new corridor that didn't exist before. Then, six feet in, it finished revealing a new item: a blacksmith's anvil.

Thanks. Dallion smiled. While it might make things a bit more difficult in the short term, this was what he wanted.

FORGING skills obtained.

You've broken through your tenth barrier.

Chapter 147: Realm Linking

I'll escort you back outside, the curate said after counting to three.

Dallion couldn't tell whether it was the epitome of efficiency or of extreme mercantilism. Either way, there was no point arguing, especially since he had already gotten what he had paid for or rather, he had gotten what Falkner had paid for.

How did it go? the boy asked, walking alongside Dallion.

Okay, I think. I've yet to understand some of the things that happened. Dallion remained deliberately vague. After all, the punishment the being in glowing red armor had warned about was no joke. When will you be having your trial?

When I turn sixteen. Father insists. Falkner sighed. However, there was no way of telling whether he did so because it was too soon or too far away. So, what now?

Now I need to get to work, or Hannah will kill me.

In fact, he was already cutting it short. Even running was likely going to get him to the Gremlins Timepiece a few minutes later than expected. There was always the option to come up with some excuse that made sense, but Dallion preferred to resort to that when he really needed it.

Can I come along? Falkner asked.

Normally the answer would be a resounding no. Dallion tended not to like people who were overly clingy, at least until he got to know them better. However, considering the favor the boy had done just now, he could only smile.

Sure. You can even eat there if you want. The food is good enough for awakened. Trust me.

Okay Falkner didnt sound at all convinced.

Item Awakening

The library emerged around Dallion.

Nil, he said.

Strangely enough, for the first time, the echo wasnt immediately visible. It took a few moments for him to appear from behind one of the distant isles of tomes. As he approached, Dallion saw that the echo was carrying what looked like a small leather suitcasemedieval style.

Nil, whats that? Dallion pointed.

Its a tome case, the echo replied. Perfect for carrying essential tomes from one place to another.

I know what it is. I meant why are you carrying it.

I thought it would be obvious. A smile flashed on Nils face. And congratulations are in order. I know I dont say this lightly, but I am extremely pleased that you managed to break through the second gate even with your recent adventures, which I hope youll never repeat.

Yeah, thanks At this point Dallion was already confused. For one thing, he wasnt sure whether the echo was criticizing or praising him. For another, he still had no idea what exactly was going on. That was until a few seconds later when his mind made the connection. You want to crash in my awakening room, dont you? Dallion crossed his arms.

I admit I would miss being in this place, but I think it would be most convenient for both of us. Since you have constructed no echoes of your own, someone must be there to protect your internal domain. Also, you have a library room, which would be suitable for a connection point.

You know what youre asking me, right?

What Im asking you is to help protect you. Just because you have passed the trial, doesnt mean you have any idea whats going on. The echo gave Dallion a stern look. Look, its not that difficult. All you have to do is link this place to your awakening room. Ill still be able to go here, but you get the added benefit of asking me for advice anytime, including while in an awakened realm.

And also, I will tell you if intruders ever try invading your room.

So many things were wrong with this. Dallion could probably come up with a convincing argument on why it was a terrible idea. For one thing, he didnt want another echo messing with his head. Although, if he were in constant touch with Nil, hed get answers to questions much faster.

I own the library, right? he asked.

Yes, my original gave the ring and everything in it myself included as a gift. And no, I cannot tell him anything about you. As you should know, the connection works the other way around. I know what he is thinking. For example, right now the captain is worried about the Nerosal guild celebration thats taking place in close to two months from now.

Okay, Ill see what I can do, but before that, I need some detailed scrolls on forging.

Forging? The echo arched a brow. You actually got forging?

Yes?

With the exception of the three hidden skill groups, and music which you already have, forging is the rarest skill there is. Having it would put you on a lot of maps, so much so that recruiters would try to snatch you away, especially if youre good. The echo put his tome case on the floor and carefully looked over Dallion, as if searching for any changes. Youll have to spend a lot of time learning it. Forging skills arent as simple as they sound. Actually, I think apprenticing under the gorgon might be a good idea for once considering the circumstances.

Okay, just stop! Dallion snapped.

This had gone far enough. When he had come here, he had two simple questions, and instead they had spoken about several other things, and apparently Dallion had agreed to let the echo live in his awakened room, and also to start learning forging from Eury.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion counted to find, then exhaled. He had no idea if this actually made him more relaxed, but it seemed to act reassuring to others.

I might link you to my room at some point, but it wont now. All I came here to ask is information on how to use forging skills adequately, and also whether Im in good enough shape to complete the selection trial alone.

I shall fetch you something to give you an idea. The echo turned around and went to one of the nearby shelves of books. As for your other question definitely not. Passing the trial is the easy part. It was pretty much expected that youd be able to succeed there. Youre nowhere near the level to pull it off. The good news is you have time, and now at least you can start increasing your skills stats again.

That was a definite plus. At least now Dallion looked forward to going on jobs rather than having to do it just for the money. Now he could finally start improving again. Still maybe he had to take the step he was afraid to take.

Okay, old man, you better not let me down on this.

Personal Awakening

A doorway formed on one of the nearby walls. Almost instantly, Nox rushed out from it, making its way to Dallions shoulder.

Yeah, Nox, Dallion laughed. Its me again, and you have a new place to roam. Just dont destroy anything here, okay? Ill be needing it.

Meow, the crackling responded. Hopefully that was more a yes than a maybe.

Happy now, Nil?

For the moment. Just dont consider this your graduation. Its more like the admittance to school.

Good thing I have you to remind me. Dallion shook his head.

Moments later, Dallions surroundings changed to the awakening shrine corridor. He had gotten the two answers he needed, and more important now he had the option to ask questions immediately than having to memorize them for later.

Nil? Dallion whispered.

Thats what you think.

Sorry? Falkner asked. Apparently Dallion had said the last slightly too loud.

Nothing, just thinking out loud, Dallion lied. Anyway, lets hurry.

The moment the two got out of the awakening shrine, they rushed to Hannahs inn. Fortunately for Dallion, he arrived there with two minutes to spare. Unfortunately, the running had caused him to build up a sweat, causing the innkeeper to give him an earful of proper hygiene and send him off to wash up and change, while welcoming Falkner as a VIP customer. That was one of the things Dallion still wasnt able to figure out why were people so impressed by the boy. Granted, he was the son of a noble, but by all accounts, he wasnt that high up in the hierarchy.

Aha, Dallion replied, barely paying attention. His entire focus was to get washed up and in a fresh pair of clothes before the lunch crowd started arriving. Thank her for me.

She can hear you, and I think thats something you should do yourself, when you have a bit more time to spare.

Sure, Ill

The suggestion made Dallion pause for a moment. For once it was actually good and serious advice and not to pick up advances. Without question, the harpsisword had directly helped him in the fight against the bladicorn, and deserved at least a proper thank you. In the process Dallion was also going to link her realm to his awakening room. Not the shield, though. At least not until it became officially his.

How do I look? Dallion asked after he changed into his spare set of clothes.

Thats really inappropriate.

Im not telling you to flirt unless you want to. Just take the time to mention that you think shes doing a good job. Youll be amazed at the results.

As much as Dallion wanted to believe that, his mind wouldnt let him. A minute later, he was down again, doing his job.

Falkner seemed mildly fascinated. The boy probably had never eaten in a tavern and it showed. The amount of attention he gave to everyone was way beyond that of a common customer. That didnt even include the amount of money he spent on food and tips. No one seemed to mind, least of all Hannah, who always had a keen eye for profit.

Not a word was mentioned about Dallions advancement. Neither Hannah nor Jiroh open the topic, and Dallion didnt volunteer any information either. Even so, his new skills remained always on his mind. Not so much the end of the level cap, but his future forging skills. From what Dallion had read in the past, they allowed him to make items both in the awakened realms and in the real world. The only things he needed to improve were enough materials for practice and a mentor. As Nil had said, Euryale sounded like the obvious choice. The only question was how would that affect Vade. Given both their standards and expectations of him, having one mentor was going to be difficult enough. Having two at the same time, though that might well turn into an outright disaster.

Chapter 148: Echo, Guardian, and Crackling

There were only two improvement requests during lunch and about half the number of usual mendings. For Dallion, however, the shift couldnt end fast enough. All the time he kept thinking about his new powers, jumping between his desire to learn forging and going further in his own dungeon.

Falkner stayed a bit longer, barely saying a few words now and then, mostly when Dallion was passing by. For some reason, Jirohs presence made him uneasy, causing the boy to tense up every time she walked near. On several occasions Dallion could have sworn he saw Falkner reach for a dagger. Considering how cheerful and easygoing he normally was, that was very untypical. Then again, maybe there were things about furies and hunters in Falkners city that Dallion didnt know about. At one point the boy just stood up and left, leaving a generous tip behind.

I think hes alright, Dallion whispered as he went to get a glass of water. He loaned me ten coins. In fact, Dallion still wasnt sure whether that was a gift or a loan. Just to be on the safe side, he planned to pay back the money first chance he got, or at least offer to.

Thats precisely what I meant. For now, youre fine, but in time people will start noticing you, and then youll be reminded of this favor.

Thats generally how it works.

At the end of the shift, Dallion was tempted to ask Hannah for permission to eat in his room. One look at her severe expression was enough to instantly give up on the notion and quietly gulp down his food. As it turned out, the innkeeper was having some trouble of her own. The Nerosal Competitions were approaching a three-week event during which awakened of all guilds, plus a few that werent, would participate in a series of events for prizes. From the descriptions it sounded like the local Olympics for awakened.

Created in honor of Archduke Lanitol, the games were to mark the end of the Wars of Succession by Count Priscord. Since then, the Priscord family had kept the tradition, adding more and more fanfare until it had become the highlight of the province. Those three weeks saw the city double in population and prices jump twice. In some cases, especially when it came to awakened goods, prices jumped even more. It was this event that earned half of the inns yearly profit, sometimes more, and also the original reason that Hannah, and the owners before her, had invested in rooms for awakened customers, not to mention hiring a cook such as Aspan.

When Dallion finished the last of his meal, he made a point to thank and compliment Hannah as the shield had suggested which earned him a very suspicious look then rushed off upstairs.

Everything alright in there, Nil? Dallion asked as he barred the door.

No, it hasnt come up. Not to mention that no one other than Dallion seemed to be able to see it. Why?

Id keep it this way. Some people might not be as open-minded as others on the topic. In any event, I can see from where it takes its stubbornness.

Stubbornness? Dallion felt a chill run down his spine.

Ive tried to teach him a few tricks, but he refuses to listen.

Youre trying to teach Nox tricks?

What else is there to do here? Its not like I havent read every scroll in the library twice. One of the differences between echoes and originals, as you should recall, is that we have an unlimited learning capacity.

Right, right. Dallion picked up his harpsisword and went to the bed. There was no reason for him to sit down before entering an awakened realm, but lately Dallion preferred it. Somehow, it made the transition easier. Just dont make a mess, youll be having company soon.

Item Awakening

Dallion was at the golden tower again. He could hear a faint melody coming from above. His music skills told him that the melody contained a large amount of sadness, enough to make him feel worse about recent events. Ideally, he should have checked on her more often after the mugging, but at the time Dallion thought it would only serve to remind how weak he still was.

Hey, he said, starting his climb to the top of the tower.

The music paused for a moment, then continued. That didnt seem like the best sign. Still, there was no backing out now.

Upon reaching the top, Dallion found the nymph playing her harp as she always had. For over a minute he stood there, listening to the flow of the song, unable to interrupt. Finally, when the song came to an end, the guardian looked up at him.

Hey, Dallion said once more, with a slight wave of his hand. There were a lot of things he could say. He could ask something on the lines of how she was doing, but all that would sound hollow. I broke through my level cap, he ventured at last. I suppose you know, since you helped me do it, he added after a while.

The guardian smiled and waved for him to come over. This time, a stool of water emerged near the harp. An interesting ability, although it seemed that everything non-human in this world had extraordinary abilities.

Sitting on it felt comfortable, as if he was made of hard rubber.

What do you think about my fights?

The nymph held her hand horizontally then tilted it left and right, displaying the universal sign for meh.

That bad? Dallion shook his head with a smile. I thought I did pretty well.

The guardian tilted her head forward, indicating that she strongly disagreed.

Okay, maybe not that well, but better than what I used to be.

Thinking back, Dallion could only cringe at his past performance. Back in Dherma he could barely keep up with the markers, thinking it an accomplishment when he managed to complete a full sequence. In a word he was a nave semi, thinking that he could take on the village chief on stubbornness alone. Given the option now, Dallion would have done a lot more research on Aspions skills before starting the fight. The only reason he had won was due to the punitive restrictions placed on the old man. Without that armored echo, things would have ended very differently.

But Im showing promise, right? Dallion asked.

The response was the more or less sharking of the hand. Despite her smile, the guardian wasnt pulling any punches.

Get out of here, Dallion said in mock anger. The shield told me you were a combat gear. Now I see what he meant. Youve been through a lot of battles, havent you?

The nymph nodded. From her level alone, Dallion could tell that she had been defeated twice in the awakened realm. As much as he wanted to ask whether he could best her in a direct challenge, he kept his mouth shut. The answer was obvious.

Ill be linking you with my awakened room. Are you okay with that?

The guardian nodded.

Nil is already there. Hes the echo of Dallion stopped. I suppose you know him already, dont you?

To his surprise, the nymph shook her head. So, what the echo had said was true: guardians and echoes didnt get along, they just tolerated each other.

In theory, there was no need for Dallion to link the sword. He could freely enter it at will, and it wasnt like his room was remotely as beautiful as this realm. In part that was why he wanted toto bring some light to his world, a sort of beacon to mark the start.

Nil is the echo of a guild captain, he explained. The old man who was supposed to test me before March did. Ring any bells?

This time there was a nod.

What do you think of him?

Dallion got the usual meh response. Shortly after, the nymph laughed. It was a strange thing to witnessall of Dallions senses told him this was a laugh, he could even imagine the sound of it however, no sound came.

Well, hes settled there. So, I guess you two can chat now and again. And of course, theres Nox. Hes been a little restless lately, but still, hes a good kitten.

She cant get here, you know.

Its still better than being alone, Dallion said.

Personal Awakening

No doorway appeared on the tower. Instead, an entire island rose from the distance. Grey and ominous, it blocked part of the perfect view, continuing into the horizon like a dark continent. There were no plants or animals on it, just an endless mass of rock with a single doorway on the face of the nearest cliff.

Not the prettiest sight, he said with a note of guilt. Sorry for ruining your view.

The nymph just made the meh hand gesture again. She appeared in good enough humor to accept such a sacrifice. Even so, Dallion couldnt help buy feel somewhat guilty.

I promise Ill find a way to transform my room into something his words trailed off.

A creature had emerged from the doorway, rushing forward directly into the sea. It took Dallion less than an instant to recognize Nox. The crackling indeed shared the curiosity of a cat and was eager to explore everything new. After being locked for a month in Dallions awakened room, it was no

wonder. Having an entire sea at Noxs disposal was quite appealing to the point that it wasn't bothered by the water.

And that's Nox, he sighed. He's a bit overenthusiastic, so please be forgiving.

The nymph wrapped her arms around her harp in an instinctive impulse to protect it. Cracklings were known for one thing after all.

Don't worry, he won't harm anything, Dallion said, even if he wasn't entirely convinced. Nox! You better not scratch anything coming up here! he shouted. I don't want any claw marks on the tower! Or anything else for that matter! He turned towards the harpsword guardian. Is there a way for you to bring him here? I'd prefer if he didn't climb up.

For the first time, there was a moment of hesitation. The nymph took one hard look at Dallion, determining his intentions. Normally awakened removed cracks from objects, but in this case, he had invited one in. On the other hand, it was a familiar domesticated crackling, so to speak.

Please? Dallion asked. I promise nothing bad will happen.

A few seconds later, the nymph capitulated. With a nod, she released her harp. A tube-like stream of water emerged from the sea, continuing through the air directly to the top of the tower. It didn't take long for Nox to spot it. The cub continued eagerly swimming along its surface, in near defiance of gravity, until it managed to reach its destination. Naturally, that destination wasn't the floor of the tower, but Dallion's shoulder.

Okay, enough theatrics, Nox. Dallion said, adjusting the crackling so its tail wouldn't keep hitting the back of his head. Try to behave. He glanced at the nymph.

The guardian remained a few steps away, observing the creature with caution. In the real world, Dallion would have brought Nox closer to prove that there was nothing to fear. Here, though, some distance was good.

So, me and this little guy will be heading to clear the next level of myself. Dallion scratched the base of Nox's ear. In a way, you and the shield will also be there. At least the version of you I have in my room or will it be you?

You know what, never mind. He smiled. I'm sure I'll find out soon.

Chapter 149: Halls of Destiny

The entrance to Dallion's new section turned out to be not where he expected it. To start with, the entrances were two, each located at the corridor ends he had not selected during his last level up. If game principles were followed, each of the sections was supposed to grant him the respective skill when cleared. Then again, this wasn't a guarantee.

Dallion also noticed that the linking had changed the rest of his awakening room slightly. For one, there were more walls on the starting area one for each skill, and all of them painfully empty. The harpsword plaque was now much more prominent, with a doorway to the nymphs tower beside it. Dallion could assume that from here on any item he linked would receive the same treatment. The thought that at some point he would have a direct view into the shields realm was somewhat disturbing, but nothing that Dallion hadn't seen before. After all, he'd had some pretty strange roommates in the past.

There was no doorway to the dartbow. Despite the many good qualities of the weapon, it had turned out that its guardian was more bestial than humanoid: a steel blade spider that could shoot its legs as projectiles. Dallion had attempted to talk, only to get attacked, at which point he quickly used his guard skills to escape the realm as quickly as possible. Apparently, only special weapons had guardians that he could lead reasonable conversations with.

The library had also changed in the most comical way. The small room that was before had become larger and more organized, containing vast amounts of neatly arranged books, displaying many of the things Dallion had learned. A massive double arch connected to an even larger library: the ring library that was just as enormous as Dallion remembered it. The funny thing was that this massive realm was one huge room, making Dallion's personal library seem like a lobby.

For some unknown reason, Nil and Nox had chosen to take residence in the smaller library room. Despite all his grumbling, the old echo appeared to have grown fond of the crackling, treating it as an overgrown cat. When Dallion had gone through there to check things out, he had found Nil on a rocking chair reading a scroll, with Nox dozing off in his lap. No questions were asked, no comments made. Dallion had only paused for a few moments before walking away, still struggling with the image burned into his brain.

The gate to his arena seemed to have gotten much closer than he remembered it. Nil's general explanation was that each awakening room conformed to its owner's development, taking on part of his characteristics. All that sounded like a lot of mumbo jumbo to Dallion, although he was happy that he wouldn't have to walk a lot to get there from now on.

Finally, one more room had appeared: dubbed the trophy room by Dallion. The room contained plaques of all achievements Dallion had gained so far, arranged by attribute. While nothing compared to his gaming achievements, there were a pleasing amount of them. Most increased an attribute by two points, although there were two that boosted it by five.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion opened the door and stepped in.

You're in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!

That definitely sounded dramatic. Dallion waited for a few moments, just to make sure that there wasn't more to the rectangle, then tapped it away.

Ready? Dallion asked. Within a second, Nox had appeared, walking confidently a few steps ahead of him. Also, Dallion could hear the harpsisword strings vibrate. Only the shield was silent, but it wasn't like he could comment at present.

Ever since passing the second gate, as it was called, Dallion wondered what the unexplored sections of his awakening room would be. As things were going, it was more like an awakening realm that would keep on growing. Thinking back, the village chief of his village had a vast number of doors in his corridor. For that to have occurred, he had to have done a lot of exploration and development. It was possible that his level was in the mid double digits. If that were so, then Dallion's grandfather had to be even more impressive.

The corridor started off pretty simple, as if it were a continuation of the existing one. Dallion couldn't see or hear anything other than his steps. Lit torches appeared on the walls at every five steps. This way Dallion at least didn't have to worry about not seeing, although he was somewhat concerned that he remained a bigger target than the creatures he was going against.

Nil, what exactly am I going to face? He asked, holding his dartbow at the ready.

That's a bit vague. Can you give me an example? Is it evil echoes of myself, or are we talking mountain sized monsters with a google eyes?

Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if it were either, considering how stubborn you are in your laziness. The creatures depend on the realm, which depends on you. Can you describe a crack?

Seeing that there's one in front of me, I think I can manage, Dallion said with a smirk.

Are you saying that all cracklings are cats?

Don't be stupid. They're not all cats, but there's no mistaking that black silhouette.

Ah, right. I keep forgetting that you've never cleaned an area before. Don't worry, you'll see that when you become a proper guild member. Area cracks, especially those of big areas, are very different from item cracks. Groups form, sometimes even tribes or minor civilizations. There is even a theory that humans originally were cracks that managed to escape

Yeah, I've heard that story, Dallion quickly interrupted. So, you're telling me that I could face anything?

That's what I've been saying so far, yes. There is no way to guess without having a basis. Once you come across a few creatures, I can speculate what else might pop up there, but not at this point. Ideally, clear a section and then I'll share my thoughts.

Thanks, Nil, Dallion sighed. As useful as the old echo was, he did have a lot of bureaucratic tendencies. It was exactly as if Dallion was listening to an old teacher with tons of experience and a huge annoyance at the arrogance of youth.

After close to a minute walking, Dallion reached the first challenge in his level and it was not at all what he was expecting.

Nil, I think I reached one of those spots Im supposed to ask you about, he said.

Something like that. Only its not exactly a crossroads.

Expanding into the darkness was one giant room. It was large, and as far as Dallion could determine, rectangular. What made it frighteningly unusual was that it was a three-dimensional puzzle maze composed of M. C. Escher drawings.

Can you see what Im seeing? he asked.

No, Im not your echo. I have to be there to see an unformed part of your awakened realm. You could describe it for me, however, if that isnt too much trouble.

Yeah well, remember when I asked you to describe what I might face? I think Im in a similar situation.

Seriously, now

Its a three-dimensional maze going along the walls, floor, and ceiling. Im not even sure if theres a difference between the walls and the ceiling. For all I know there might not be any gravity here!

Thats actually a good description.

Well, if thats all, youve stumbled in a paradox cube. I understand how it might seem a bit concerning, but theres nothing extraordinary about it. A lot of personal realm sections have paradox cubes. In fact, youre quite fortunate. Paradox cubes always yield an additional reward for completion.

You mean like a skill? Dallions concern was quickly replaced by eagerness.

Skills are one option. Achievements are also a possibility. However, its most likely that youll gain a metaphor.

Oh Dallion felt far less enthusiastic, as if he'd received a participation ribbon for a prize. Well, I guess that will improve my writing prose.

While that would be a considerable improvement, what I meant in terms that you would understand is an item. You will most likely receive an item. Remember how your initial buckler and short sword didn't exist? Those are metaphors as well.

Why didn't you just say that to start with?

I did. I just forgot that you have the memory span of a berserker flea and couldn't remember discussions we had a week ago.

Strictly speaking, that wasn't precisely true. While Dallion recalled part of that discussion, the metaphor element hadn't been the focus of it, not to mention that it had occurred years ago by true time standards. Even so, the possibility of getting a new weapon seemed intriguing. Furthermore, now that he had forging skills, he could construct that weapon in real life, too.

Okay, any advice on how I tackle this?

It's rather simple. All you need to do is make your way to the center. There you will face your guardian-echo. Defeat him, but do not leave the section. The moment you do it'll become part of your awakening realm and you'll lose any reward it might hold.

Don't know how to tell you this, but I don't see any center.

Oh, it's there, you're just too far away to see it.

At that instant, Dallion felt slightly disheartened. If the opposite wall was not a wall, but part of the inner section of the cube, this could take longer than he thought.

The reward is hidden somewhere within the cube. To get it all you have to do is find it.

Can't I find it first and then fight the guardian?

That's possible but unlikely. Remember, you have no indication where it might be. Defeating the guardian will not only allow you to increase your level, but also light up the entire section, making the search easier.

So, like a sphere item?

A crude comparison, but adequate. Of course, if you think you can get an achievement from it, you might try finding the reward first. After centuries of research, though, I can safely say that the chances are slim, especially since you've already earned a similar achievement.

Defeat the guardian first, got you, Dallion said. Any further advice?

Don't let your doubts stop you, take advantage of the stubbornness you have, and ask me anytime you see something you're uncertain about. There's no shame in ignorance until it becomes a habit.

Right. Dallion put his dartbow again. Time to start this adventure.

Chapter 150: Paradox Cube

It was hard enough trying to find the path in a complex zero gravity maze. It took Dallion a while before Dallion got the grip of practical perspective shift. It all looked fun and well in the movies,

but whenever he tried to walk on a wall, twenty years of experience on Earth rejected the notion, causing him to fall. It didnt help that the memories of Dallion from this world also saw it as too unusual to be of any help. In the end, it was Nox that had shown him what to do. The little crackling was quite at ease with the whole concept, not to mention more than eager to claw anything that blocked his path.

Now! Dallion shouted, playing a chord. The trio of creatures that were blocking the way froze, weapons motionless mid strike. Immediately, Nox took advantage. Aiming not at the creatures, but at the grip of their weapons, he clawed just enough to slice through the leather. Then, when Dallion played a second chord, he did the same to the enemies shoes.

And again!

The attackers froze up once more. After ruining their footing, the cracking proceeded to scar up as much as he could of a blade. Despite his enthusiasm it still took the creature several strikes to form a deep crack at the base of the hilt, and even that wasnt enough to cause it to break. However, what Nox started, Dallion could finish.

Playing the next cord, Dallion charged forward, red and green markers following behind. One strike of the shield and a blade flew off from one of the attackers sword. Another and the echo was on the ground. Two more thumps followed, flooring the remaining, all before the effects of the music were over.

Okay. Dallion sat on the ground. Lets rest a bit.

As he did, the echoes who had attacked disappeared into nothingness. That was one of the principles of fighting oneself when the echoes were defeated, they disappeared on their own; there was no point in killing them. Their appearance could have saved some work. At present they had the form of distorted mirror reflections of Dallion and other people hed met. Strangely, all of them

were exclusively from this world. Apparently, Earth was beyond limit even when it came to illusions.

It was getting more and more exhausting, and Dallion had barely reached the inner area of the cube. Despite what Nil had initially said, reaching the center was more difficult than expected. It turned out that the distant walls weren't part of the central structure, but of another cube room within the main one, and as it turned out later, there seemed to be an even smaller cube further still. Just thinking about the area he'd have to search to find the secret reward was enough to make Dallion dizzy. No wonder that Nil had suggested getting rid of the guardian first. The way things were going, Dallion was starting to think whether he should even bother with the reward. After all, he could always make up for it later, when he had gained a few levels. Then again, according to Nil, the awakening dungeon was also going to get more difficult. That was one of the prices of self-leveling: the more one did, the more difficult it became.

Nil, you were right, Dallion said. They only attack when I reach a certain spot. I guess I'm pretty much safe once I've defeated them. As much as Dallion wanted to believe his words, though, he couldn't. The suspicion that something may suddenly pop up while he was resting had grabbed hold of him.

That is the common behavior of paradox cubes. And before you start making any suggestions, your cube is without a doubt a common one.

How could you be so sure?

You'd be singing a very different tune if it wasn't. For one thing, nothing inside of it is moving.

That would indeed have been a considerable difficulty increase. For a world that was so log on technology, and had no idea of space travel, there sure were a lot of breaking of the laws of physics. Back on Earth, Dallion suspected that over ten space agencies would grab the opportunity to train their crews on how to perform spacewalks without exposing them to danger. He also knew a hundred game companies that would try to copy the experience and make it part of game creation.

Dallion tried to visualize as much of the cube as possible. He still remembers the path he had taken to pass certain sections, but more and more elements were becoming a blur.

Okay, enough rest. He stood up. Nox, do you sense anything?

The crackling waves its tailan indication that everything was fine. So far there hadn't been a single crack which was good. However, Dallion would have preferred to have a way to determine the location of enemies before they attacked.

Let's keep going.

A staircase led to a wall, which later became a floor leading to an archway that Dallion used as a bridge. Every step of the way, he held his harpsisword, ready to react. When he reached the end of the bridge. Dallion stepped sideways, shifting his perspective in such a way that the side of the bridge became a path. From what he could tell that was going to lead him to the innermost cube. The major difference was that unlike the other two cubes, this one had only windows leading in; or as Nil would say, a window is a hole from a different perspective.

On more than one occasion Dallion was tempted to have Nox attempt to slice an entrance, but decided against it. Doing so would only hurt him further.

One thing kept bothering him, though there didn't seem to be any particular challenge in going through this maze. After the initial shock, Dallion was able to see where he was supposed to go and simply follow the nearest path that connected the cubes. If this was such a big deal, he would have expected

COMBAT INITIATED

Not again, Dallion grumbled.

Four echoes appeared a dozen steps away. This time all of them were armed with dartbows. Disarming them wasn't going to be as easy as before. Dallion's initial thought was whether not to just kill them all and take the twenty percent total health loss. The reckless side in him urged for that to happen that was the faster way and it ensured that he wouldn't receive even more damage from the bolts. The cautious side of Dallion, however, won the mental fight, making him dash forward.

Shield, he said.

The metal segments expanded to the side of a giant umbrella, protecting his entire front. And just on time. Moments later, Dallion heard iron pieces bounce off with a clang. Four taps four deflected shots. If the echoes recharged as quickly as Dallion did, there would be another four shots in a second.

Nox, hide! Dallion ordered. He couldn't afford him getting hit.

Green markers appeared. This was one time at which the skill advice was faster than him. The enemies were going to attempt a combined double attack: two rushing at him, while two more kept him in their sights from a distance. Not a particularly bad plan, though not overly imaginative either.

Suddenly the strings of the harp sword vibrated on their own. Dallion stopped moving the shield a fraction to the right so as to see what was going on. The moment he did he was able to see the echoes shift perspective and start running on the side of the path towards Dallion.

Nice try! Dallion jumped off the path, only to land on its side, precisely at the moment one of the attackers had come near. The creature was a distorted version of the Dherma village chief with a giant head and two dartbows. The moment Dallion was in his sights, the echo raised both weapons forward. Before he could fire, though, Dallion used the shield's ability to create a wall. However, instead of surrounding himself, he used it to extend towards the echo, slamming it in the process.

Three green shield markers appeared in front of Dallion. Instinct combined with the shield's reaction proved to be enough to block another pair of bolts from striking him. Unfortunately, the next bolt was not deflected.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has decreased by 10%

The damage was hardly significant, but Dallion wasn't able to see the trajectory the bolt had followed. Thinking back, the only explanation could be that it too had twisted around the path, shifting gravity as it did so.

Nil, I'm facing a bunch that can change perspective. Dallion said as he jumped up and flipped mid air, landing on a flight of stairs that until recently had taken the role of a ceiling. None of the enemy clones were closer, although a green shield marker suggested that another bolt was on its way toward Dallion. Where are they coming from?!

That would be a bit difficult right now, Dallion said through clenched teeth. He still didn't see any way into the final cube. So far, if he had used his dartbow to kill off two of the echoes, things would have been much easier. Now, at seventy percent life, he no longer had that option.

Another bolt flew Dallion's way. The projectile was blocked lazily as Dallion jumped up again, landing on the edge of the innermost cube. From here, the only thing he could do was run along the stone surface until he found a hole to jump into. The problem was as Dallion soon discovered that there were no longer any openings. The entire surface had turned into one solid wall.

Nil, I've got a problem Dallion kept on running. All the windows to the center just disappeared.

That's slightly unusual. The cubes shouldn't change properties mid battle. Keep on looking, there must be at least one way to enter.

Okay, but I'm not seeing any, Dallion shouted. Maybe he was going to have to use Nox after all.