

Leveling up 161

Chapter 161: A Fury's Visit

The days counted down to Dallion's selection test. And during that time four things occupied Dallion's mind. The guild work became a regular thing to the point that Estezol booked his jobs in advance, so Dallion and the siblings could go right at it first thing in the morning. The sudden influx of sphere items not only at the Icepicker Guild, but in all guilds in Nerosa had increased the number of jobs guild members could have, allowing Dallion to do three per day. That not only let him boost his skills quite a bit, but earned him so much money that he started keeping most of it in the guild.

Dallion had made several attempts to pay back Falkner, including offering twenty percent interest. The boy had flatly refused, saying it was a favor in need and nothing more. While the explanation sounded innocent enough, Dallion was starting to be concerned about it. Apparently, Nil had been right there was a favor hanging over him now, and at some point, Falkner was going to collect, and from what Dallion could see the favor would not involve money.

Training was the second thing that took part of Dallion's days, specifically trying to figure out ways to use his forging skills in and out of awakened realms. While inside made more and more attempts to successfully forge an object. None of the tries resulted in anything, but he was slowly learning to follow part of the steps. Just one or two at first, but gradually, and with enough stubbornness, he managed to get as far as the twentieth correct step. The perception increase had helped a lot, though it was still too low for him to see the layers Euryale had described.

To no surprise, the gorgon was also on his mind in more ways than one. Even with all his other chores and occupations, he kept counting the days to her return, wondering what she was doing out there. After five days, he started checking on her workshop every day in the hopes to see it open. Alas, nothing but statues greeted him each time. The moment she came back, there were a number of things they had to talk about. The key was one thing, in a broader sense. And then there was the matter of his newly acquired skill.

Euryale had already promised to teach him forging and possibly give him some more combat hints as well. However, there was where part of the complications began. If Dallion passed his selection trail which he was confident he would have Vend as a mentor. The elite had been keeping an eye on him lately, checking on his jobs, and occasionally joining in on the celebration feasts with advice on how to defeat sphere item creatures. One could say that the mentoring process had already begun. It would be awkward if Dallion refused, becoming his guild subordinate now. At the same time getting in a relationship with Euryale was likely to pose questions. Dallion still had no idea why, but Nil had warned him on several occasions to keep his distance from her, even after it became obvious the two were getting close. It was starting to sound like there was some history between her and the Icepicker guild.

In the end Dallion decided he'd stick with Eury, even if it meant him leaving the guild. Hopefully, it wasn't going to come to that.

The last thing that kept Dallion occupied with was the most trivial, yet most important in the short term: personal development. Between his exploration work at the guild and inns chores, Dallion had improved a total of twenty-eight skill points. Most had gone to raise his music, reaching the respectable level of twenty-five. The rest Dallion had split equally between attack and defense, bringing his guard skills to a round twenty and his attack skills to eighteen. While the initial gamer

logic was to increase music to the extreme, Dallion had come to the conclusion with Nils help that a high skill was not as efficient without the attributes to back it up. Group leveling was slow and annoying, but in the long run better than min-maxing, at least until Dallion passed the next gate.

Shield Dallion sighed.

This had become the new topic of conversation that the dryad shield kept bringing up. Dallion had already made it clear that he wasn't going to discuss Euryale, or any of his love life for that matter, nor did he appreciate talks on fashion and bodybuilding. As a result, music instruments and the stone orchid had become hot topics. It was almost incredible how difficult it was to get the guardian to stop talking.

A lute, for example. Or a flute. Or something more exotic, if you wish. When you get your forging skills to par, Ill teach you how to make some of the really cool musical instruments.

No need. For some reason Dallion had negative preconceptions when it came to that.

Trust me. I know you think its pointless, but real-world practice counts for a lot. Even the stuck-up kid will agree with me on this. Thats why you should do some exercises here as well. Id highly recommend swimming, personally. Not to mention your gorgon friend will agree with me on that.

Thin ice, shield. Dallion did his best to appear uninterested, but an image did pop up in his mind.

A chorus of encouragement sounded in Dallions mind.

Even Harp agrees with me. Singing to the plant five minutes before bed isnt going to cut it. Get an instrument, learn it and start playing during dinner time. People like going to a place that has an inn awakened, but they really love awakened bards. And a bard without a musical instrument is like a fork without a knife possible, but no matter the skill, everyone feels something is missing.

An interesting comparison. In his heart Dallion knew the guardian to be right, but he really didn't want to start yet another activity to focus on. It was difficult enough to juggle between two jobs, learning, training, and a potential love life. Thinking about it, life had become much more similar to college on Earth than he could have imagined: Dallion was in effect a paid intern studying to get a permanent position, with a second job in the service industry to cover his rent and student debt in terms of shield rent. On the positive side, everything was much more fun, and Dallion had all the time in the world.

Ill think about it, Dallion grumbled. Just dont expect me to become some wayward bard.

Have no fear, Ive perfectly low expectations for you in that area. At this point, even a tambourine would be an improvement.

That was harsh. Dallion had a mind to go out and buy the most complex instrument just to show him. The idea matured for several seconds in his mind, then was quickly cast out. There was no need for another forging fiasco.

There was a sudden knock on the window. Given that Dallion was on the top floor, that was more than a bit curious. There had been a few instances of birds gathering on the window, but that was

weeks ago. Stranger still, thanks to Dallions increased perception, he could tell that the knock came from someones knuckles.

Remaining perfectly still, Dallion focused on every sound. The knock came again, more insistent than before. Dallion got up from his bed. To his surprise, there was a person outside.

Puzzled, Dallion went over and opened to open the window.

Good afternoon, mister Darude, the fury said. She was dressed in the same type of butlers clothes Dallion had seen her during their last talk. My apologies for the inconvenience, but might I have a word?

Hello, Dallion replied. He knew that furies could fly, though not what the proper etiquette should be. Should he invite her inside, or would that be considered rude? Would you like to come in? Ultimately, he decided to offer.

Thats kind of you, but this wouldnt take long. She smiled. Using his music skills, Dallion could tell she appreciated the offer. The general has asked to see you. Im aware that this is a short notice, but he was very insistent on it. I trust that you could make time for it now?

Dallion had watched enough gangster movies to know where this was going. To a degree he just had been made an offer he couldnt refuse, just in a far more polite fashion.

Sure. Ill be right outside.

That would be splendid. Please bring the armadil shield along with you.

That was unexpected. Okay. The harpsisword as well?

No, that wont be necessary. Just the shield would be fine.

Right. Give me just a few minutes and Ill be out in front.

With a nod, the fury whooshed away as if she were diving through air. Dallion had read a few things about the species after his unfortunate mugging. Information on the other races turned out to be surprisingly scarce, considering the size of the ring library. Nil, of course, had come up with the excuse that the librarys aim was to help a person be a better awakened, and not focus so much on other things. However, Dallion knew that to be untrue. There were plenty of tomes on human historical figures, and not a single detailed account of a non-human one. Other than a few basic characteristics and abilities, everything else was left pretty much to the imagination.

Dallion put on his bootsdartbow includedgrabbed the shield and rushed out of his room. When he got to the street, the fury was already there. Her clothes had gained her some interest from the passers-by. If Dallion was to guess, they cost enough to place her in the household of an upper-class family.

Sorry for the wait, Dallion said.

Not at all. I am aware you have a quite busy schedule, the fury replied. There was a slight smile on her face, but even without his music skills Dallion could tell it was fake. If anything, it could be treated as part of her uniform. Please, follow me.

While Dallion knew where they were headed to, the fury took a new path to get there. For one thing, it was much more pleasant than Arthurows had used. The neighborhoods they passed through were also considerably nicer.

I never got your name, Dallion said while they walked.

That is quite alright, sir. Im just under the employ of the Combat Arena.

Okay, but Id still like to know, if thats okay?

The question had a greater reaction than Dallion expected. There was a single vibration of gratitude among the furys other emotions. A week ago, Dallion wouldnt have noticed it, but after raising his music skills to their current level, and using them non stop since he had started to distinguish between the faint nuances of the things surrounding him.

Its Karin, came the reply. Thank you for asking.

My pleasure. And you can call me Dallion.

Now that would be most inappropriate, sir. The employee facade was back up in full force.

Of course, sir, she said in a fashion suggesting she got that question a lot.

Are there different types of furies? I mean Ive only seen five since Ive come here, but all of you seem quite different from each other.

I assume youre talking about your colleague at the Gremlins Timepiece?

There were. Unfortunately, Im not fully aware of the current state of things. I was born in Nerosal. In fact, all servants at the Combat Arena are second or third generation. Most furies in the city are. There was a slight pause, along with a tingle of regret. Your friend is a thunder fury. Thats why shes so different, and also why the rest of us stay away from her.

Thunder fury? Dallion didnt remember Jiroh mentioning that, although as a hunter, he could imagine her being dangerous.

If it were my business, Id advise that you keep your distance from her.

Ive seen her fight first hand. I think I had an idea what shes capable of. Were good friends though.

Forgive me, sir, but you dont have the slightest idea. Furies are like clouds. We fly, we float, we move along with the wind. We can stand up to any awakened short of nobility. Your friend is like a thundercloud. She looks beautiful and exotic among the rest of us, but if she decides she can raze entire neighborhoods to the ground.

Chapter 162: The General's Bargain

Dangerous like a thundercloud Such a description didnt match Jiroh in the least. Then again, Dallion had only known her for little more than a month. He knew she was a hunter, and had also seen her fight to get an idea of her strength, but even so, he couldnt believe that she was that dangerous. Hannah herself had said that shed taken the fury years ago when she had been young. On the other hand, Jiroh had mentioned shed come to the city after the war. In theory it was possible for both things to be true, but even so there were a lot of additional details missing.

Ill be fine. Dallion played it down. Jirohs helped me a lot ever since I came here.

As I said, sir, its not my place to make any suggestions, Karin said. Please excuse what I said.

Easier said than done. Thankfully, by the time they arrived at the Combat Arena, other worries had come to the foreground. Dallion had, of course, taken five gold coins and change with him. He had a sneaky suspicion that the general might up the renting price.

This way, please. The fury opened the door, then guided him through the lobby and down the lavishly decorated corridor until they reached the generals room. Unlike last time, there were a few other people as well. All of them were dressed well beyond Dallions station. Thankfully, none seemed to notice or particularly care about him.

Knocking on the generals door, Karin waited a few seconds, then opened it. From the way she was standing, Dallion could assume she wasnt invited to join.

Thanks, Karin, he whispered, then stepped inside.

The room had changed somewhat since the last time Dallion was there. A display case was added containing more pieces to the generals collection. All the new items were exotic weaponsphere items from what Dallion could tell. Judging by their dull state, none of them were fully explored.

Ah, Dal, old boy, the general said as he raked the gold sand in a pattern. His two fury bodyguards were a short distance away. So good of you to make it. Give me a moment, will you?

Of course, General.

For several minutes Dallion watched the general rake away. He had little doubt this was meant to intimidate him, though there was no denying that the snob was skilled in what he was doing. Every action was precise to a fault. Dallion could only guess how long he had practiced this hobby. Once done, the general placed the rake on the sand of gold. Almost immediately, a fury floated to him, and lifted him in the air, so he could walk back to the desk of the room without ruining what he had achieved.

A most inconvenient hobby, I know, the general said the other fury helped him put on an emerald cyan robe. Still, in this day and age, its difficult to come by anything. Tell me, do you have any hobbies?

I have a stone orchid, Dallion said in the hopes that it would be seen as exotic. To his disappointment, that got no reaction from his host.

I understand youll be having your selection trial shortly, the general went on.

Thats right. Three days from now.

Three days. How time flies. However, as unfortunate as it is, you'll have to pass your trial without my shield.

What? Dallion couldn't stop himself. But I've rented him for a month.

That's true, sadly I learned that you had a recent adventure. The general's voice suddenly became sharp as a blade. The friendly welcoming demeanour was instantly replaced by cold, calculated ruthlessness. Gambling with your own treasures is stupid. Gambling with mine is unacceptable. For that purpose, I'm ending our arrangement.

But I got it back, Dallion protested.

A small blessing, no doubt, but not enough.

I'll pay double!

Please, Dal. Even if you had the money to buy it outright, it wouldn't matter. Shields of this type have become something of a rarity. You can't buy them for gold.

What about our arrangement? Dallion asked. As tempting as it was to use music skills, Dallion was sensible enough not to dare. The general had asked to see him in action during their last negotiations. Any attempt now would be noticed and only get Dallion in further trouble. You said you'd give him to me if I fulfil the destiny of an artifact you have.

That was the case. However, I've already had the cane fully explored. In fact, that happened this very morning. Tough luck, old boy, but there's nothing

Another artifact, then. I'll fulfil another artifact.

A note of greed rang within the general. Dallion was able to see it clearly. As much as the man didn't want to lose the shield, he wanted to get a fully functioning artifact more.

Tempting, but you no, the general said at last. With the sudden influx of artifacts to the city, prices of exploration have dropped substantially. I could easily pay a guild to do it for me.

What if I promise to bring you an artifact from the wilderness? Dallion asked. This was a trump card he didn't want to play, but it wasn't like he had a lot of a choice right now. Even with the influx of artifacts, you can't guarantee what will come your way and whether you'll buy it. You're not the only collector in Nerosal, as you said.

The corner of the general's mouth curled up. Dallion knew he had won the initiative. Now all he had to do was to seal the deal.

Since you know about my incident, you also know that I'm a potential hunter. Loan me the shield and I promise to exchange it for an artifact of your choosing.

There are a lot of potential hunters. Even I was said to be one during my youth. What makes you think you'll become an actual one?

Even if I don't, I'm friends with two that are. I'll make sure you get what you want. You don't lose a thing in this arrangement. The shield remains yours until I fulfil my part. Until then I only get to rent it.

There was another moment of silence. The general was going over the mental calculation. As he did, Dallion could sense the greed from him increasing.

An interesting proposal. The general stood up, then went to his new display case. His fingers slid along one of the dim artefacts a rapier which had a blade twisted as a corkscrew. Just to be clear. You agree to clear an artifact of my choosing for free just to gain the right to keep renting my shield. Meanwhile, you'll also start searching for a wilderness artefact matching my requirements. Is that right?

Yes. Dallion nodded. I'll even keep paying the monthly amount.

I told you, I'm not interested in money. However the general turned around. Exploring an artefact of my choice will earn you a year's worth of rent. For each year you don't bring me the artifact I asked for, you'll clear something else, again of my choice.

Done.

Also the general raised a finger if anything happens to the shield, you still have to fulfil your part of the bargain.

That's understood.

Do I need to sign anything to make it official?

Oh, there's no need for that. The shield has witnessed it and will make sure you stick to our arrangement.

And just to prove my good faith, I won't ask you to improve any of my items until you pass your selection trial. You're confident that you won't run into any problems there, I trust?

Even if I do, I'll still be here after the end of the test. If I have to, I'll explore your artefact a level at a time until it's cleared.

Quite the spirit you have there. If I'd known you'd be this eager, I wouldn't have asked for this meeting. Although I'm glad I did.

Have you chosen an item, General? Dallion asked.

Yes, but who knows? Maybe something better will come up by the time you visit. Oh, and rest assured, I won't give you an impossible task. After all, my goal is to see the effects of the item, not have you get sealed in the process.

The thought sent chills down Dallion's spine. It had been a while since he had worried about becoming sealed. The guild emblem prevented that from happening, but the option was still there.

With that ominous remark, the meeting was quickly over. Dallion made his way out in the corridor, where Karin was waiting. Seeing the shield on Dallion's arm, she raised a brow.

We came to an arrangement, Dallion pre-empted her question. I get to keep on renting the shield.

Do you ever wonder about other furies? Dallion asked all of a sudden. I mean, there's only a few of you in the city. Have you ever wondered what it might be to go out there and find more of your kind?

It is not my place to think of such things, sir, the fury replied. I was born here. Anything beyond the realm of the city is not my concern.

Three days, that was how much remained until the test. Not much, but enough to develop a few more skills. As for levelling himself up, Dallion decided against it for the moment. Considering the difficulty of the first challenge, he didn't feel ready to poke more into his subconscious for the moment, not when there remained an easier way to get two more levels. Actually, if his suspicions were correct, it was possible there was an easier way for him to get another five levels after that as well.

Do you really plan to become a hunter? the fury asked as they entered the lobby.

You heard that?

I'm a fury, sir. We work well with wind and air vibrations.

That explains a few things. Dallion smiled. Yes, I'm thinking about it. Not in the immediate future, but still. Why? Is there something you'd like me to find?

No, sir, Karin lied. I was just concerned that you might be putting yourself needlessly in danger. There is no protection outside of the city's area.

I've passed through the wilderness before. I had to get here somehow, remember?

That is correct, sir, but at the time you weren't a double digit. Things are different now. The stronger you become the more visible you get.

That's very philosophical of you. Had the fury also reached the gate but refused to complete the trial? At this point Dallion could only speculate. Similar to Jiroh, he had no idea if Karin even was awakened. Not to worry, though. I have a traveller's emblem, so I should be fine.

And if I'm not, there's at least one person out there who'll have my back.

Chapter 163: Time of Testing

He had never felt so nervous since the day he applied for college. Now, as then, he had spent an hour contemplating what could happen before getting out of bed and spending an hour more slowly getting dressed. It was only when Nil had insistently reminded him that the only certain way to fail the trial was not to arrive on time, that Dallion rushed a bit.

A month had passed since the last, and only, time he had been to an Icepicker selection trial. Back then he didn't know what was going on, so he didn't feel the pressure. Of course, back then neither he nor anyone else had particularly high expectations. Everything had seemed like a game with close to zero consequences. The stakes were much higher now.

Dallion placed the harpsisword in the sheath on his back, then strapped the shield on his left arm. If the room had a large enough mirror, he'd probably spend another ten minutes looking at himself. Even without one, though, Dallion felt the need to straighten his shirt.

I get it, Dallion hissed. Somehow the guardian managed to get on his nerves, even when he was being supportive.

A few words of encouragement from Nil would have gone a long way right about now. Sadly, the echo had let him know he wouldn't be talking until after the trial was over, describing it as a conflict of interest if he did.

Well, time to get going, he said out loud for encouragement.

Darude, Dallion whispered, then left the room.

Breakfast was waiting for him when he got down, but he didn't have any appetite. Hannah likely guessed as much because she didn't comment on it as she usually did.

Hey, Dallion said, trying his best to seem confident. I'll be heading to the guild. Should be back in about an hour.

Count to seven, the innkeeper said.

Eh? Dallion blinked.

I don't have to be awakened to tell what's on your mind. When you're in doubt, take a deep breath and count to seven and recite the names of the Moons in your mind. Try it out.

Sure. The notion felt stupid, superstitious, or both. Regardless, Dallion did it all the same. He didn't have any better idea of calming his nerves, and when he had tried using music on himself earlier, the result had been insignificant.

Astreza, Berennah Centor, Dararr, Emion, Felygn, Galatea

The names passed through his mind as he thought of them. To Dallion's astonishment, when he finished, most of his fear was gone. Eyes wide, he stared at Hannah. He felt lighter, as if the weight of the world had been removed from his shoulders.

Told you. The woman crossed her arms with a smirk. Old soldier's trick. My father told me when I was a child. Never fails, as long as you don't start relying on it above everything else.

I think I know what you mean.

Good. Now go out there and show them what you're made of!

This was the first time the innkeeper had encouraged him openly. Dallion was surprised to the point he didn't know exactly how to react. In the end, a simple nod said more than words ever could. With that he left the inn and started his way to the guildhall.

Despite the shields' insinuations, women did not faint as Dallion passed by. However, a lot noticed him, and they weren't the only ones. It wasn't just the two exotic pieces of gear that he carried with him. He carried those frequently to the guild and back. It was more about the way he walked. There was a certain attitude surrounding him, as if he was in an invisible bubble separating him from the rest of the city, almost like a mini realm of his own. The sensation was present the entire way to the guildhall, forcing the latest batch of newbies crowded outside to open a path as he made his way into the building. Only then did the feeling subside.

Dal! Estezol waved as Dallion entered the hall. Because of the many people gathered, only his hands were visible above everyone's heads. Dal, come here! Actually, don't! Stay there! I'll get to you.

Okay. Dallion smiled. Leave it to Estezol to cheer up even the tensest day.

The small bearded man pushed his way through like a badger through corn until he got to where he needed to be.

You had me worried. He grabbed Dallions hand, pulling him in the direction of the staircase. I was afraid you might skip out this one.

What made you think that? Dallion followed behind, trying to keep his arm from getting pulled out of its socket. For a small fellow, Estezol was quite strong.

Youve been out of it the last few days. Youve barely said a word during your last few jobs, you never stay at the feasts, a few times you even forgot to get your pay. Ive been keeping it, though, so no worries there.

Probably had something on my mind.

I know, and I wont blame you. Its not every day that someone gets to make a claim like that. Completing a selection alone? You really have guts, dont you?

If that was supposed to be encouraging, it missed its mark by a mile. Now Dallion started asking himself questions. Back when he had made the request, he didnt think it was such a big deal. Difficult, definitely, but certainly not something that would garner so much attention.

Estezol dragged Dallion to the fourth floor. Stopping in front of one of the doors, the bearded man let Dallion go, straightened up, then gave a quick knock and opened the door. There were over a dozen people in the room. Most Dallion knew in passing, a few of them quite well. Vend was there, along with Spike, and several more elites. Dallion also recognized the crafter from the rescue mission. Judging by her guild emblem on display, the woman was a captain, and she wasnt the only one; March and Adzorg were also there, as were a few guild lieutenants.

Glad that you finally made it, Mister Darude, Adzorg said in his dismissive tone. We were beginning to think we got the day of the selection wrong.

You know why we are gathered here, I suppose?

To watch me have the selection trial? Dallions voice lacked confidence.

To observe your progress, the old man corrected. Let me be honest. The selection trials are a boring experience. We see the same mistakes made by different people, or sometimes the same people doing them over and over again. When Vend approached us with your the captain deliberately paused, giving Vend a glance. Request, let us say, some of us were intrigued.

Vend, March said, the single word ringing in the room.

Without delay, the elite stepped out of the group and placed a dagger on the single small table in the middle of the room.

The dagger from your last trial, Vend clarified. Your goal is to clear the dagger all the way, fulfilling its destiny. Do that and youll receive a mentor from within this room.

That was an alteration Dallion didnt remember being discussed. What was Vend trying to say? Dallion had been under the impression that the deal was for Vend to be his mentor. If it was that it would be someone in the room instead, could that mean that a captain might show interest? By the looks of the people at the very least Dallion would get an elite as a mentor that was provided he managed to pass the trial.

As youd expect, well be observing your progress, the third captain said. Her voice had a motherly ring to it, although strictness and doubt were emanating from her just as much as it was from everyone else. Dont worry, there wont be a crowd of echoes following you around. You wont even notice us.

While practical, that wasnt Dallions main concern. The fact that hed have half of guild management watching and evaluating his every move was stressful enough. It also meant that he couldnt rely on Nox as much as he wanted, lest that created a bad impression.

Go ahead. Vend stepped back. Focus on the goal, he whispered. Dont worry about the rest.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion counted to seven, recited all the names of the Moons, then went up to the table and placed his hand on the dagger.

Sphere Item Awakening

The start of level one. This was where Dallion had experienced his first sphere item. Looking at the rectangles, only three of the levels were cleared.

This brings back memories.

Dallion reached forward. The harpsiwird appeared in his hand, ready for use. Dallion did a few swings, mostly to get a feeling of the space. The cave was big enough to allow him free swing as long as he kept to the middle of the tunnel. That means he had to be a bit more precise with his actions. Unlike before, Dallion wasnt going to take a supportive role. This time he was prepared to swing, slash, and use music all at once. After all, the point wasnt merely to completely clear all five levels. As much as the people denied it, they were watching with the intention of being impressed.

If memory served, the first enemy creatures were Amphibions. As Dallion had found while working as a packrat, they were among the weakest there were in artefacts of this type. Their numbers also werent terribly impressive. It wasnt until the later levels that things would get serious.

Ready for some action? Dallion asked the sword. All the strings vibrated in response. Well, youll get plenty of it. Well start with a warmup.

The real first challenge would be the Thunder Leopard. Until then everything Dallion had to do was to be slow and thorough.

Any of you want to surrender? Dallion shouted. His voice echoed through the tunnel. Some would say that was overconfidence, and a month ago they would have been right. At present, though, Dallion wasn't showing off; he was using a trick he had learned from the echo of himself. I just want to clear the level, there's no point in killing you off.

Every sound he made was imbued with dread, doubt, and sadness. From his experience, the phrases were enough to give them second thoughts before attacking. The best thing was that it didn't matter whether he could see them or not. As long as the sound of his voice managed to reach them, it would plant the seeds of doubt, preparing the Amphibians for the reaping.

Suit yourselves. Dallion went on forward.

Chapter 164: Slashing Through

Slashing his way to the guardian chamber turned out to be much easier than Dallion expected. The first wave had tried to rush him, charging as a group. Dallion had dispatched them using Janna and Kallan's method. As it turned out, one didn't have to know athletics or acrobatics to perform something, just a lot of practice.

Seeing the failure of their fellow Amphibians, the rest of the waves had merged into single giant entities, trying to overpower him using force. The attempt failed even more spectacularly. In those instances Dallion had combined the standard arc slash with his music skills, causing the giant enemies to freeze for a second at a time, while he reduced it in size, then killed it off altogether. The first were so one-sided that Dallion genuinely felt sorry for the creatures to the point he had offered them to surrender yet again. To everyone's disappointment, none of them did.

After the last wave was done, two of the harp's strings vibrated.

I know, not much of a challenge. Dallion tapped the blade of the weapon with his left hand. Were still getting started, though.

As the guardian chamber loomed before him, Dallion stopped. The thunder leopard was visible before him, still snoozing on the far side, as if nothing had happened. This was extremely suspicious, though. There was no way anything could be still sleeping after the ruckus Dallion had caused before.

I know you're awake, he said loudly.

The guardian didn't react. Looking at him with his music skills, Dallion could see a blob of pure calm pulsing in the creature's head.

I'm fine if you just let me pass. Maybe you'll settle for a draw? Dallion offered, while also attempting to make the leopard susceptible to the idea. Like you, I prefer to save my strength for later.

No reaction. Sadly, by all accounts, it seemed like a fight was inevitable.

The moment Dallion set foot in the actual chamber, the guardian's ears perked up.

COMBAT INITIATED

In the blink of the eye, the creature went from snoozing to attacking state, leaping at Dallion, fangs bared. The sensation of calm had disappeared, replaced by a deep desire to battle. It was as if a switch had been flipped.

Back when Dallion was level six, such an attack would have caught him completely by surprise. Now, though, the blink of an eye was enough time for him to see where the creature was going, target its weak spot, then step to the side while simultaneously performing a counterattack; and all that before a single marker had the time to appear.

FATAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 500%

With one swing, a third of the Thunder Leopards health was gone. The creature recoiled with a roar, retreating back to the opposite side of the chamber.

Dallion felt his pulse rush. It wasn't out of fear, rather it was the excitement of the encounter. Nil would be disappointed by this. The echo had stressed as often as possible that retaining ones composure in combat was the one sure path to victory. In his view, losing to emotions was the same as creating opportunities for the enemy. In all likelihood he was right, yet an urge stronger than logic had gripped Dallion right now the sensation of his own power.

Lets go, he whispered, and dashed forward. This time, he was the attacker.

The harpsisword slashed the air, as Dallion performed a double slash aimed at the guardians head. In his mind Dallion could already see the victory.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

PAW SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its FRONT RIGHT PAW

Somehow the guardian had managed to block the attack with its paw, losing it in the process. It was a good tactic, so much so that Dallion was actually impressed. Immediately he pulled back, increasing the distance between the two. If there was one thing that he had learned the hard way, it was that brainless fighting didn't stand a chance against strong opponents. The local guardian was both skilled and smart enough to think creatively, which meant it wasn't to be underestimated.

Good one, Dallion said with a smile. I thought I had won there.

Surprisingly, no anger resonated from the creature. If anything, the guardian was pleased to have this fight. Maybe it too wanted a challenge? There was no telling how long it had spent in the item waiting for something interesting to occur. The sad thing was that once the dagger had become guild property, the only interesting events the guardians within it had to look forward to were the monthly selection trials. Just thinking about it sent shivers down Dallions spine. Now he understood why his shield was so reluctant to return to the generals collection.

Your turn. Dallion went into a defensive stance, holding the harpsisword in front of him. It was a battle of wills now.

Defense markers started appearing. The guardian had the intention of charging right at Dallion. A single attack was going to determine the victor.

Dallion focused. In his mind, he could see two ways in which the leopard attacked. In one case it was going to attempt to use its mass to pin him to the ground, in the other it was going to swipe with its left paw. Both seemed equally likely, and both shared the same weakness.

The guardian leapt forward.

If Dallion were to use his music skills, he could end the fight right now. Once the guardian was frozen, all it would take were two good hits for it to be defeated. That would be a cheap victory, though. Instead, Dallion waited.

The creature got closer and closer. Every instant the attack zone marker focused on Dallion more and more until in the end the path of the attack was clear a paw swipe.

At that moment Dallion made his move. Before the claws could reach him, he moves his left arm beneath his right in such a fashion that the armadil shield would cover his entire right side. Catching on to his plan, the shield extended, completely blocking the attack. Meanwhile, Dallion performed the killing blow, lunging forward.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage is increased by 1000%

The tip of the harpsisword pierced the guardians head, causing the beast to burst into a cloud of light sparkles. Once the cloud disappeared, the expected blue rectangle appeared.

DAGGER Level 1 has been cleared!

There was no reward this timenormal, considering Dallion had already cleared this level before. In theory, if he had requested a different dagger, he could have increased his level more, although that too was doubtful. From what he had seen so far in the world, abusive exploits were few and vigorously guarded. If a simple item could act as the equivalent to an awakening shrine, the local nobility or the Order of the Seven Moons would have done something about it.

Thanks for the duel, Dallion said to the empty room, then proceeded through the gate to the next level.

One down, two to go. The second level was home to the Scylla guardian. From what Dallion remembered, despite the initial scare, that guardian hadnt been too difficult to defeat. If anything, getting to it had proved harder. Granted, this time there was no echo to worry about, but even so the numbers of Shardflies and Toothroaches the creatures of that level had been impressive. This was one occasion in which music would have to come into play.

Standing at the tunnel opening of the second level, Dallion took a deep breath, then shouted as loud as his lungs would allow. The noise quickly caught the attention of the nearest creatures and went on to disturb those further in.

At this point, there was no need to wait. Dallion gripped his harpsisword and started playing. Chords of weight filled the air. At present they were ineffective, but as creatures started to appear, Dallion readjusted his timing so as to match the vibration in the approaching insects. The process that had been next to impossible weeks ago now seemed childishly easy. It was only designed to work on small creatures, of course. All attempts to use it on guardians had proved to be ineffective. In this case, though, as the waves of shardflies made their approach, their wings got heavy, causing them to drop out of the air and onto the tunnel walls.

The toothroaches fared no differently. Initially, they too rushed forward with the goal of landing as many bites as they could. Yet the closer they got to the source of the sound, the slower they became until ten feet away they stopped moving altogether, instead piling up as new waves pushed them forward.

Once new creatures stopped arriving, Dallion then dashed forward and cleared the piles by slashing through them repetitively with his sword.

There was something very satisfying in the process, almost as if Dallion was sweeping away his enemies out of existence. If only cleaning had been this much fun back on Earth, he would have done it several times per day.

A few minutes later, the cave floor was clean again.

Anyone else? Dallion asked, ready to play the harpsisword again if needed. Nothing reacted, but that didn't make him lower his guard. He had suffered the consequences of overconfidence too many times in the past to take this for granted.

Interestingly enough, in this instance Dallion turned out to be correct. There were no more creature attacks until Dallion reached the second guardian chamber. This time the Scylla wasn't on the chamber ceiling, nor was it sleeping. Standing patiently in the middle of the hall, in its nymph form, the guardian waited.

I thought it might be you, the guardian said upon seeing Dallion. You've changed a lot since last time.

Well, I do my best to surprise, Dallion said cautiously. You've changed as well. You look less tarry.

The tar that last time had formed octopus tentacles now had transformed into a set of clothes covering the scylla. Looking at him, Dallion could not help but notice the similarities between this guardian and that of his sword. Many of their features were similar: height, body frame, facial features, even the sapphire eyes.

I'm not talking to you, the scylla replied. I'm talking to her. The guardian pointed at the harpsisword.

You two know each other? Dallion asked, channeling his voice so as to make the other predisposed to sharing information.

Knew, the scylla corrected. Back at the time, she never would have linked to the realm of a simple human, and yet here we are. How things change.

Simple? Im not

A series of chords coming from the harpsisword interrupted him. Apparently, the two guardians did know each other and had things to discuss. Dallion tried to follow the music sounds, but this time they werent something he could interpret. Whatever was going on, Harp didnt want him to be involved.

Oh, dont get me wrong. You could have done much worse. The Scylla seemed amused. There may be promise for this one yet. In the end, we all carry our burden. And who knows, maybe this time itll finally be over.

Over? In what way?

Over in the way that youll finally clear this prison and set us free.

Chapter 165: Gift of Battle

Prison? Dallion asked.

Was the dagger a prison? The copyette had said something similar as well. So, the sphere items were prisons. Did that mean that fulfilling their destiny meant freeing the inhabitants? The last part felt like a stretch.

If you dont know it by now, youll never know, the guardian replied.

Dallion couldnt tell whether the guardian was being facetious, or this was a result of an information limiting curse put on him. His music skills told him that the scylla wasnt lying, and also interestingly enough that he wasnt as angry at him as the guardian pretended to be. There were shimmers of hope among the other emotions, along with an acceptance of fate.

You wont tell me more, will you? Dallion shook his head. Harp, do you want me to give you two some time before we start?

The strings echoed a resounding no, to which the scylla laughed.

Always contrary. Maybe thats the better approach. Its not good to cling to the past too much, but I just cant help myself. Spikes emerged from the tarry substance that covered the guardian, slowly turning into swords. Dallion, is it? You keep asking realm beings to accept a draw or surrender. Since youve been nicer than I expected, Ill give you a gift, one that you desperately need.

The twelve swords emerging from him formed a semi-circle, then linked together, creating a spiked black halo behind the guardians head.

A real battle, the scylla added, and rushed forward.

COMBAT INITIATED

The speed was faster than Dallion expected, barely giving him a chance to react. Thankfully, the harpsisword did for him. Guiding his hand, it made a circular arc, parrying all the blades that threatened Dallion well before the green defense markers appeared.

For the slightest of instances the action caught him off guard, but he snapped out of it quickly leaping to the side, then back.

The guardian had no intention of giving him a break, quickly following up with another charge attack.

Shield! Dallion shouted. The metal gear extended over the entire left part of his body. The sound of blades crashed into it. Dallion felt the force pushing him back, but managed to keep his ground. Unable to handle the pressure, the black blades shattered like glass. The fragments then quickly melted and slid along the floor returning to the scylla.

The intensity with which the guardian kept up the pressure made it impossible for Dallion to play a chord his right hand was gripping the harpsword, while the left was positioning the armadil shield to protect as much of him as possible. Both were necessary to keep him from getting sliced up.

This was so much harder than the thunder leopard, as if Dallion had jumped into an elite tournament after completing a game tutorial.

You wont win if you keep defending, the scylla said. There was no malice in his words, just an observation. Your sword wont be able to save you forever.

Red and green markers appeared, constantly moving about to keep up with the dynamic of the battle. Every attempt to follow a series of markers ended in failure mid-way, reminding Dallion of the difficulties he had upon first arriving in this world. It wasnt that his skills were so low, rather his opponent was extremely good at disrupting every attempt as it happened. If Dallion was to win this one, he was going to have to create his own opening, and fast.

Shield, inverse! Dallion said.

The semi sphere bent in the opposite direction, covering the front of the guardian like a lid. At that point Dallion didnt think. He knew that he would have a disadvantage if he attacked outright, but there was one thing that his enemy couldnt counter, something that Dallion had become exceedingly good at.

You can dance if you want to, Dallion sang as he took advantage of the moment of respite.

Two sets of music targeted the scylla, as a blue marker appeared on the harpsword. The guardian faltered. It was barely noticeable, no larger than a hairline crack in a door, but it was a start. All that Dallion had to do now was push the door open.

Completing his first chord, he immediately swung at the scylla. Guessing Dallions approach, the armadil shield contracted, allowing the blade to pass through what had recently been metal, striking the enemy.

MINOR HIT

A red rectangle emerged in the air. It was somewhat disappointing. After so many instances of critical and fatal attacks, seeing one without bonuses almost felt wrong. However, this didnt matter. First blood had been drawn and it was Dallion who had ended up achieving it.

Interesting approach, the guardian said, holding the blade with his hand. Looking closely, that was the reason why the attack had done as little damage as it had. A good start, though you forgot one thing. He fastened his grip round the weapon. Just because I haven't been using my hands doesn't mean I don't have them.

The second he felt resistance, he let the weapon go. Persisting in this would only put him at a disadvantage, especially since there were better ways of handling this in the awakened realms. The dartbow emerged in his free hand, firing a bolt at the guardian.

MINOR HIT

The dartbow was also let go. As Dallion leaped back, the shield expanding in front of him right on time to save him from a new set of black blades headed his way. Fragments filled the air like black droplets. This time, though, instead of falling to the ground, they morphed into needles and darted past the edges of the shield at Dallion.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

The pain was insignificant, but it was a reminder that Dallion had to be careful. His gamer mind already started calculating his odds of success. At a fifteen percent loss, it was looking likely that he would be at half health when facing the final guardian, and that was being optimistic. This battle wasn't over, and then there was the copyette to face.

Reaching out, Dallion summoned his harpsisword. The weapon appeared in his hand, ready for battle. Dallion could feel the guardian inside, wanting to clash against the scylla. Unfortunately, that was the one thing he couldn't let her do. This was the turning point—the strategic gamble that would either win the battle or lose it.

Shield, back, he said, ordering the shield to contract once more. Everywhere with helicopter, he started singing again.

As before, the music attack caused the guardian to freeze for an instant. Dallion could see his emotions changing. A sliver of appreciation had started to appear. Dallion played another chord. Back on Earth, Dallion would have never thought he would be able to hold two different melodies in his mind at the same time. Thanks to the magic of the awakening powers, he was not doing it with ease while also avoiding any enemy attacks. The song, to Dallion's shame, was one he knew through memes. The only times he had sung it were at parties. Thankfully, he could rest assured that no one in the present world was familiar with its history. At the same time, the chords he played were half a second off, bombarding the scylla with calm and a desire to surrender.

Initially, Dallions effort didnt seem to have any effect. Always on the defensive, he barely managed to avoid the scyllas attacks by the skin of his teeth. Every other moment was accompanied by flashbacks of game over screens. Slowly, though, the tide began to turn in Dallions favor. The attacks, while still ferocious, no longer seemed chaotic. A pattern of behavior emerged, letting Dallion know what to expect. Evading turned into a reflex that his body did on its own, letting him focus on the music attacks. Then, finally, the opportunity appearedan undefended weak spot.

Part of Dallions mind analyzed this from a logical perspective. There was no doubt his opponent was skilled, so there always was the possibility that he was baiting Dallion into a trap. What appeared to be an opportunity could well end up being the cause of Dallions loss. Given that the scylla was still not using his hands in battle, it was likely he had another ace up his sleeve, so the best solution was to wait a bit before acting.

At the same time, the remaining ninety-five percent of Dallions mind yelled just do it and so he did. Still singing, he thrust the harpsisword forward, striking the guardian in the chest.

CRITICAL WOUND

Damage has increased by 200%

Surprised? the guardian asked, as the black blades sunk back into his shirt. Im still limited by the dagger. I can only use part of my skills against you.

Dallion swallowed. While it was nice to have the sphere item match their strength, it also showed him what monsters existed out there in the real world.

Also, the fight is still going on, only not against you.

Harp? Dallion looked at the harpsisword. Only now he noticed that the weapon kept vibrating in his hand.

She always was an enthusiastic one. Good to see shes having fun, even in this state. Streaks of blue started to mix with the tar that composed his outfit. This is the second time you broke my monotony. As the copyette would tell you, thats more than one could hope for here. We can probably continue the fight and Ill cause you enough damage so you cant win, but would there be any point?

Dallion had stopped singing. He could see the calm in the guardian grow. Hopefully, it was he that had caused this. Either that, or the harpsisword was to thank for the scyllas change of heart.

Do you think you can make it all the way?

Yes, Dallion said without hesitation. I can.

Or at least you think you do. The guardian smiled. There are three of us you have to watch out for in this realm. The other is just a beast like the leopard. Youve already seen the copyette, so you know what to expect. As for the last the approach you used against me wont work. Music is powerful, like magic, but relying on it too much will make you weak.

CRITICAL WOUND

Damage has increased by 200%

Huh? Dallion stared at the rectangle.

I told you the fight is still going on. With my present limitations, Im no match for her. Still, it was nice sparring again. I missed that.

A sense of regret appeared, pulsing in the guardians chest. Moments later, he disappeared in a cloud of black mist.

DAGGER Level 2 has been cleared!

Two out of five cleared. Now Dallion only had to face the copyette before venturing into the unknown. He was supposed to be happy with this victory. Despite a rough start, he had only lost fifteen percent of his health, which put him in a good spot moving on. And still, part of him was conflicted.

Harp, are you okay? he asked, looking at the harpsisword. The weapon had gone completely still. Even so, Dallion felt part of her emotions. The link he had formed let him get a glimpse of sadness very similar to the one he had seen in the scylla.

The strings vibrated, conveying I am fine. Dallion, though, could see she wasnt being entirely truthful.

Its fine. He looked at the entrance to the next level. We did good. Or at the very least, they had done well.

Chapter 166: Dallions Galore

The third level was completely deprived of creatures. Last time this was the place where Arthurows had freaked out very much, to Bels amusement. Now, it was as if someone had meticulously cleaned the cave walls, floor, and ceiling in an attempt to make the place inhabitable. Dallions initial reaction was to think that a Shelfey had taken residence. However, the amount of light and lack of mother-of-pearl made him reconsider.

Close to the guardian chamber, Dallion saw a red carpet rolled out to welcome him. His music skills made it obvious that this was no carpetit had emotions running through it.

Im touched by the welcome, but would prefer not to tread on you walking in, he said, emanating a sensation of deep calm.

On cue, the carpet rolled up into the guardian chamber where it instantly disappeared. So much for a grand entrance, but better safe than sorry.

Youll have to be fast on this one, shield, Dallion whispered.

The guardian chamber was quite different from last time. Instead of thrones and statues, massive paintings covered the walls. On closer inspection, the paintings illustrated scenes from the last fight

that had occurred here. Dallion recognized several of the scenes, especially the one in which he fought himself with a harpsisword.

I knew you'd be back, the copyette said, appearing in Dallion's form. The only difference was that he had chosen to color his clothes crimson red. You were vibrating with determination to clear the dagger. An obsession almost.

The guardian moved closer, stepping next to Dallion in front of the large painting.

Nice spar, wasn't it? Pity you knew so little back then. I would have loved to show you more of my tricks.

Maybe you'll get to show them now, Dallion said. On the surface he remained calm, but was ready to engage in battle at a moment's notice. You gave me a really goofy expression, he commented.

Oh? The copyette moved closer to the painting. Looks fine to me.

Your face, not mine. Dallion corrected.

Ah, that. I was just trying to bring some life to the scene. The expression changed. Better now?

Dallion remained silent. The copyette had been talkative last time as well, and that made him feel on edge for some reason.

Nice use of music, by the way, the guardian said. A bit on the nose. Anyone with the skill will catch on quickly, but still a massive improvement from last time. What level is it at now? Twenties? Thirties?

Dallion tensed up.

It's obvious you've climbed a few levels. The copyette shook its head. Didn't you get the whole Moon speech? Once you pass this gate the world will be different, and so on?

There was a long moment of silence.

Thirties, Dallion replied at last.

Not bad. It's time to learn some subtlety, then. Direct music interference is fine when you're starting out, but it gets you targeted later on. I guess things really have gone downhill on the outside. Maybe you'll be fine as you are now, after all.

Talkative as ever, I see.

You've only seen me once before, the copyette laughed. But yes, I like to talk. As I told you, after a while that's all there is.

Other guardians would disagree.

Are you referring to the dryad? There was an unusually sharp note in the guardian's voice. Or the nymph? Trust me, there's no way you can compare them to me. So, what's your schedule like this time? Have some time to chat or do you want to get directly to business?

A trick question if Dallion had ever heard one. He wasn't at all in the mood for a chat, not against someone who knew music for one thing. Then again, refusing might make the situation worse. At least the scylla had given him somewhat of a warning before attacking. With this number of paintings in the room, Dallion could well end up fighting against a dozen of himself.

Why not both? he asked.

Now it was the copyettes turn to be surprised. Tilting his head to the side, he indicated for Dallion to continue with his suggestion.

And miss out on another music duel?

Will I need to fight if Im good enough with music? Dallion asked, deliberately adding vibrations of surrender in his voice.

The attempt was caught immediately by the guardian, who only shook its head with a smile. Amusement and a sense of acceptance resonated within him.

You really think it would be easier for you?

Dallion felt the waves of emotion hit him like a hammer. Fear, hesitation, but also eagerness. At the first few words, he remained still, trying to weather the effect. Later he tried to examine the emotions, unbinding them in mentally to see what they were composed of. It was almost like a work of artsubtle threads were hidden among the rest, making them difficult to notice and even more difficult to counter. Even while Dallion was aware of what was going on, he still felt the effects. It took several seconds more for him to come close to his previous state, though by doing so he had caused whole new emotions to appear.

Still up for it? the copyette asked. Remember, I might be cursed not to exceed your level, but have a lot more experience.

I have to get experience from somewhere, Dallion said. He felt excitement at the prospect of a music fight, and he was fairly certain that feeling originated from him.

Good intention, but no, the copyette said firmly. Youre not ready, and I dont want to stop you from reaching the last level. Youll have your hands full there, anyway.

Whats so special about the fifth level?

Someone who you wont defeat in the state youre in. Of course, if you clear the next level youll get to level up. Id suggest going for mind. Its what you need right now.

Hey!

Why not perception?

Indeed, why not? Its your decision. If you think that will help you best, go for it.

Perception made the most sense. It would go quite well with Dallions music skills as well as possibly help him with the forging a bit. On the other hand, maybe mind was the way to go?

Increasing that would let him think faster, remember more, not to mention explore battle outcomes in his mind. Or maybe he should back body and reaction So many options, so little time to decide.

Dont overthink it, the guardian went on. The best solution is always the first. Trust me, I know.

In my place, what would you do? I mean, how will you defeat the final guardian?

The red clad Dallion placed a finger on his lips.

In your place, what would I do? he repeated the question. The best solution is to do nothing. As you are, you dont stand much of a chance. Sure, you might be able to defeat the next guardian and thats a big if but youll never manage to deal with the last. Music has no effect on him, not to mention hes way faster. At best you might get lucky enough to get a third of his health.

Even with this? Dallion drew his harpsisword. Shes pretty powerful.

Im sure. The copyette chuckled, taking a step back. But shes not the one wholl be fighting. You are, and youre not ready.

So, youre saying I should surrender?

Its not the worst option.

Actually, it was. If Dallion surrendered, hed fail his trial for the second time. Not only would that keep him from getting a mentor and better job guilds, but he would lose the dagger as well. And he had plans for that daggersomething he had thought of the moment Vend had explained the nature of sphere items.

Will you accept a draw? Dallion asked.

It doesnt work that way. There are no draws in sphere items. Through combat or negotiation one of us must lose.

Youre sure about that?

Absolutely. I wish there was another way.

Pity.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion swung his sword at the copyette. The action was fast, but his intention had already warned the guardian what to expect. However, the blade didnt stop, continuing to slash the painting in two.

MEDIUM STRIKE

Damage has increased by 50%

The painting shriveled up, disappearing into nothingness. Dallions suspicion had proved to be true every part of the copyette represented the same creature, thus harming part harmed the whole. Dashing away, Dallion let go of the harpsisword and summoned his dartbow. Within seconds bolts split the air targeting the remaining pictures. Unfortunately, the guardian was prepared. The rest of the paintings trickled down the walls in unison, merging into a second copy of Dallion, this one dressed entirely in blue clothes. Weapons also appeared in both instances of the copyette the red Dallion held a copy of the harpsisword, while the other held a dartbow and a standard buckler. For some reason, the armadil shield was not there.

Cant blame me for trying, the red instance of the guardian said. I was considering letting you go on. Probably not for long, Dallion smirked.

He had read up a bit on copyettes. While most of the information had been removed and forgotten, the ring library had mentioned a few things. Chief among them was the copyettes desire to trick people. They had been described as powerful in ages past, with the ability to mimic skills and weapons of anyone they fought, not so much as to win in a direct conflict, but to create the illusion they could. Their skills, while outstanding, were always weaker than those of the original, forcing them to resort to other tactics.

The music attack that the guardian had done was indeed quite successful. The initial taste wasnt to impress Dallion, but to make him think that he was incapable of spotting any music attacks. Quite a sneaky approach, and it had a chance of being successful if it wasnt for Nox once more. The crackling had easily spotted what the guardian was doing and then done something that Dallion thought impossibleit had sliced through the music thread that attempted to attach itself to the realm. Dallion was still able to feel how the guardian was trying to influence him, but felt no impulse to actually do it.

Still want to have that music duel? Dallion asked.

Maybe next time.

The red copy of the copyette charged forward, while the blue one shot a bolt in Dallions direction, limiting his movement. Now there were two attacks to worry about, though after the scyllas barrage they seemed more than manageable.

Blocking the bolt with his shield, Dallion twisted around, spinning in place. The harpsisword did a circular slash, followed by another.

From experience Dallion knew that it took about a second before the dartbow could shoot again. He also knew that the copyette had one serious weakness.

Now, Nox! Waiting for the precise moment of turning, he changed target, leaping in the direction of the blue instance, while the cracklingthat had timely appeared on his shoulderwent for the red one.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

The second bolt grazed him as Dallion slammed the harpsisword into the blue copyette.

A loud sound filled the chamber, as blade met the copyettes buckler. Despite the force of the strike, the harpsisword wasnt able to chop through the shield, going only half an inch in. Instantly both sides of the fight reacted: the blue copyette moved to aim its dartbow at Dallion to shoot from point blank range, while Dallion reached for the strings of the harpsisword.

Ultimately, Harp proved to be faster than all, causing the strings to vibrate. Her action only caused the blue copyette to freeze for one second, but that was enough. Dallion played a second chord while pushing on the sword. This time the shield snapped in two like a broken biscuit.

You really need to mimic better.

CRITICAL HIT

Damage has increased by 200%

Now there were only two Dallions left in the chamber.

Chapter 167: Copyette's Nature

Two on one was definitely an advantage, and now that the tables had turned, Dallion had the upper hand. There was no question that a lot was thanks to Nox. The crackling had developed a lot since it had become his familiar. Now it no longer needed instructions to fight, not to mention that it had caught on to quite a few tricks. Either it had picked up a lot during the times Dallion had used it in battle, or Nil had been busy training it in the library. The mental image of a cat learning to read was stranger than anything Dallion had seen so far, but as long as it helped, he had nothing against it.

Reduced to a single entity, the copyette did everything to focus its attacks on Nox. However, on each occasion that the creature was in danger, Dallion would intervene with an attack of his own.

The harpsisword held by the guardian changed, transforming into a fan-like blade.

Interesting weapon and also annoying. The guardian was using it to simultaneously attack and defend. After a few more moments, a second one appeared.

Nox, go high! Dallion shouted as he combined a slash attack with another music chord.

The copyette didn't fall for it, deflecting the harpsisword, instead of blocking it head on. At the same time, he spun-kicked the crackling to the opposite side of the wall.

MINOR FAMILIAR WOUND

NOX's health has been decreased by 20%.

You're not used to singing in public, are you? the copyette asked, folding one of the sword-fans and pointing the tip at Dallion. Could be quite inconvenient.

Instead of an answer, Dallion played another set of chords in rapid succession, nullifying all music attacks hidden in the guardians voice. Even so, his anxiety increased nonetheless.

Better get over that stumbling block, otherwise you'll never make it, even if you defeat me.

I'm going to defeat you either way, Dallion replied, still jamming chords. One way or another.

Know any songs, Harp? Dallion asked.

The sword remained silent. There were things that she wasn't prepared to do, even for him. Apparently, Dallion was on his own. Ignoring his feeling of shame once more, he started singing.

The combat intensified along both fronts. Songs and blades clashed against one another. Markers flashed everywhere, like at a rave party.

Each thrust and slash Dallion did was easily blocked by the copyette's sword-fan, in nearly the same fashion Dallion used his shield to protect himself from counterattacks. Every few seconds Nox would leap in, attempting to leave his mark on the battle, and to a degree he was successful.

The fight continued for minutes. Despite Dallion's initial success, neither side had an advantage. It wasn't so much that the guardian was better, but it was countering everything that Dallion threw at it, Nox included. Kicks, strikes, even music were all countered and thrown back. The crackling too proved not overly useful. Each scar it left on the guardians weapons, the copyette would reshape it, leaving no trace.

As much as Dallion didn't want to do this, it was time for some sacrifices. As they said offense was the best defense. Timing a double slash attack to coincide with Nox's latest charge, Dallion jumped back and threw the harpsisword in the direction of the copyette.

From this distance, it was impossible to miss. The sword managed to pierce through the guardians defense, causing a moderate wound. Quite the lucky strike, one had to admit, but that wasn't what Dallion was aiming for. Unstrapping the shield from his left arm, he threw it at the copyette.

Mid-flight, the shield extended, bending in the direction of its enemy. Realizing the intent, the copyette stopped paying attention to Nox and blocked the shield with both his weapons. Fourteen blades struck the approaching shield, keeping it away so it couldn't envelop. At that precise point,

Dallion charged forward, the harpsisword once more in his hand. The armadil shield contracted, jamming the tips of the blades between its segments.

An opening, Dallion said as he pushed on.

There was no way the guardian could block or deflect the attack now, so it did the only thing available attempt to move back only to trip backwards on Nox, who had strategically positioned himself just behind the guardians feet.

The copyette lost its footing. Determined to keep its balance, the creature changed form again. Dallions human appearance, along with the clothes, melted away, replaced by a semi-transparent blob. At that point, however, it was already too late. The harpsisword mercilessly pierced it, sinking halfway to the hilt.

FATAL HIT

Damage has increased by 500%

Good one, the guardian whispers. This was no longer Dallions voice, but the copyettes own. It sounded remarkably clear, almost cheerful.

A slime? Dallion asked, still holding the sword firmly with both hands.

What do you think copyettes are? the guardian let out one last chuckle before disappearing into a cloud of grey particles.

DAGGER Level 3 has been cleared!

Slimes were copyettes? Dallion hadnt expected that, though it explained quite a few things. Logically, that was the best form to be able to shape-shift into something else; definitely better than a bucket of gel.

Meow? Nox sniffed the ground where the guardian had been, then let out a sneeze.

You said it, Nox. Dallion smiled. I think weve deserved some rest. He sat on the floor.

The fight hadnt lasted long enough to tire him at his current level, though mentally he felt exhausted. The copyette was right about one thing: it would be nice to increase his mind if he planned to use so many skills simultaneously. That was something to think about moving on.

Any comments so far, Nil? Dallion asked. How am I doing so far?

No reaction.

Back to silent mode, I guess. Any chance you can explain why the heck didnt you say that copyettes were slimes?

Then again, there was no explanation why the scylla had turned out to be a nymph. Nothing in the history or the guardian tomes had made any reference of the sort. Just like there was no clear history of the chainlings or even the crippled star. Each time Dallion had asked he had received the same explanation: thats a matter for the Order of the Seven Moons.

The moments of rest became minutes, then stretch to half an hour. If Dallion didnt know he was being watched by half the senior guild staff, he would have remained longer. With a stretch and a sigh, he stood up and went to the gate leading to the fourth level.

Nox, stay close. Now that crackling was out of the bag, there was no point in hiding him.

The fourth level was just as dark as he remembered. Normally he would have taken a lantern. This time, though, he had something better.

Faint outlines appeared. While not perfect, the music skill had granted him the ability to see somewhat once he had increased it beyond thirty. It wasn't a lot, but if that was to be combined with the ability to see emotions of creatures, it was more than enough.

Get ready, Harp, Dallion whispered. Last time he was here he had been killed by a single jackalope.

Without waiting, he played a chord combining calm and fear and continued forward.

It didn't take long for the first enemy to appear. The emotions were just as hostile as Dallion remembered them, causing him to stop in his tracks and even consider moving slightly back. Moments later, he saw something else a vibration that hadn't been present before, the same that he had been playing ever since arriving on the level: fear.

That was the psychological boost he needed. It was as if a puzzle piece had clicked in place, letting him get on with the fight, and that he did.

Green defense markers emerged around Dallion, but he ignored them completely as he rushed on, sword in hand. From this point on, it was all about the slashing. The armadil shield sensed Dallion's tactic and extended, providing him with as much protection as it could without limiting his movements.

A few of the jackalopes charged at him, attempting to perform their antler rush. The attack was short-lived, as Dallion evaded it with ease and cut them down moments later. Soon the battle became just as one-sided as it had been on the previous levels. Despite the speed and agility of the blocking creatures, they were no match for an awakened with adequate gear and the knowledge to use them adequately.

Half a minute proved necessary to eliminate the entire first wave of jackalopes. After that things got even easier. Seeing they were no match as a group, the next waves merged together into single giant entities. A series of strikes, combined with the harp's words music sound enhancement and they were no more. Even Nox chose not to take part in the battle, finding the prey beneath him. After following Dallion for a while, the crackling had decided to return to his awakening realm and wait there for something more challenging.

Finally, after what felt like a long annoying walk through a swamp of enemies, Dallion finally reached the guardian chamber. Initially, he expected it to be dark, but after a while he started seeing a blue glow down the tunnel. Uncertain of what he was seeing, Dallion stopped using his music skills. The glow was still there, like the glow of a monitor bleeding under a door.

Any help you can give me on this, Nil?

Once again, the echo said nothing.

Thanks anyway. Dallion went on. If the previous two guardians were to be believed, the last guardian belonged to an imprisoned race. That meant that this one was a creature of some sort. Thinking back, though, Dallion couldn't remember anything that glowed blue.

Nox, he said. The crackling appeared on his shoulder, then promptly jumped to the floor. I'll go first. You wait a bit, then if you have a chance attack from behind.

Several strings on the harpsisword vibrated.

With each step, the glow became stronger. Something was illuminating the entire guardian chamber. From this distance, it was impossible to see what exactly. Music vision didn't help either. Whatever the guardian was, it was in one of the sides of the chamber, making it impossible to see directly.

Going back to his initial logic from back when he had entered with his party, the attribute to be tested had to be body. That meant most likely that Dallion would face a colossus or golem of some sort.

Dallion held his breath and rushed in, immediately going into a defensive stance. The moment he did, he saw that he couldn't have been more wrong.

LEVEL 4 GUARDIAN

Species: Azure Firebird

Class: Fire

Statistics 100% HP

A firebird? Dallion gasped.

But it wasn't just any firebird. Slimmer than the ones he had faced before, this one was made up entirely of blue flames.

Chapter 168: The Atypical Guardian

What are you? Dallion asked.

The firebird looked at him with amusement and curiosity, standing so close to the chamber wall that it was almost touching.

Nil, I'd like some help with this.

That wasn't very reassuring. On the other hand, he couldn't detect any hostility coming from the guardian. If the gate to the next level was open, Dallion might as well have just passed through.

You okay for a draw?

The giant bird tilted its head in the fashion only owls could. Green eyes glistened in the same fashion that a standard firebirds would. Normally those would be the weak points Dallion would target to defeat the creature. Would it be the same here, though?

Any chance you could surrender and let me pass? Dallion used his music skills to add weight to the suggestion.

There was no effect whatsoever. The guardian tilted its head to the other side, its emotions unchanged.

I guess not. He swung the harpsisword in the air, clearly indicating his intentions. Lets do this.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion prepped his shield. The expectation was that the firebird would throw a wave of flame in his direction. Instead, the guardian moved back, pressing against the wall. The hundreds of flames composing its feathers merged into one that spread along the stone surface, then flashed along the entire wall to the other side of the chamber. It was like watching a propane flame ignite.

Not only was the creature made of flame, but it had the equivalent of teleportation as well? This was going to be difficult.

Dallion let go of the harpsisword and summoned the dartbow. His first shot targeted the guardian in the chest. The bolt went through the chamber, passing through the firebird and into the wall behind. The next bolt targeted the eye. Keeping a steady hand, Dallion exhaled and squeezed the trigger once more.

This time the guardian reacted, bursting along the wall and moving to an entirely different spot. Dallions response was to repeat the action, this time faster. Time after time hed shoot at the firebird, going as fast as the weapon would let him. For a moment he felt like in a cowboy movie, shooting at cans around him. The only difference was that the can would either remain perfectly still or poof elsewhere should the bolt be aimed at the correct spot.

It was obvious that the creature was mocking Dallion. Had it wanted it could have counterattacked at any point, yet for ten seconds it persistently moved about the wall of the chamber, proving its superiority. At one point, it even moved to the ceilingjust a quick demonstration that wasnt off limits either.

Stop! Dallion said, filling the word with an intense dose of calm.

Instead of obeying, the guardian moved again, this time sliding along the floor. The moment Dallion caught a glimpse, he knew what was in store, yet his reaction speed was too low for him to be able to do anything about it. Before he could jump, blue flames had already surrounded him, lifting him in the air the same way a crow would grab a mouse.

Dallions pulse spiked as the flaming beak tightened around him. The shield had extended, protecting his left side, though Dallion could still feel the heat from the right. Emerging from the floor, the guardian gained form, then continued on, slamming Dallion into the ceiling, before merging into the stone surface.

MEDIUM WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 10%

The pain felt very real, as if Dallion had been slammed in the face and chest with a desk. And that was the least of his worries. The moment the pain disappeared, gravity took over, pulling Dallion back to the floor. From this distance he wasn't expected to lose any more health thanks to his body level. However, that had never been the guardians goal. When Dallion halved the distance down, the guardian emerged from below, once more driving him up into the ceiling.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

What the Dallion managed to say before the process repeated again.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

This would have been comical if it wasn't so serious. Dallion was trapped in a real-life combo of attacks from which there didn't seem to be any escape. Already he had lost as much health as all the previous guardians combined. A few more slams against the ceiling and he wouldn't be able to face the final guardian even if he managed to deal with this one.

This was a fine mess Dallion had gotten himself into. After so many years of battles and learning all in the span of a real-life month he had become complacent. Up to now he had never considered a guardian could make use of its surroundings in such a way. The firebird seemed to have no openings or weak points, because it wasn't the one attacking. Instead, it was using other forces to deal damage. If Dallion had been forced to fight flames alone, as he had in the past, he had strategies he could use. The current situation was as if he were fighting against a brick wall. Suddenly, a thought passed through his mind. Not losing an instant, Dallion unstrapped the shield from his arm.

Cocoon me! he shouted.

Before he could finish, the shield extended, enveloping Dallion in a large metal ball. No sooner had it done so than a loud thud resonated through it. Dallion then felt as if he were falling down once before the ball was propelled back into the ceiling again. Not the best situation, but at least he wasn't losing health now.

For half a minute the ball, with Dallion in it, went up and down until suddenly there was no further thrust. Left to gravity, the large metal sphere continued down, crashing into the ground.

Ouch! Dallion went.

As the pain subsided, nothing but stillness remained.

Shield, wheres the bird? Dallion asked.

While he knew that the shield couldn't respond, he was also aware that the harp's word could. A soft melody soon followed, letting him know that the guardian was in fact there, looking at the shield with curiosity and pecking it with its beak of fire.

The first thing Dallion could imagine upon hearing that was the encounter between a sparrow and a gold ball. When he had seen the clip back on Earth, he had found it hilarious. It wasn't so hilarious now, although it got him thinking. The guardians behavior strongly reminded him of someone else he had fought a while back. It was something of a gamble, but given how poorly he was doing so far, it was worth a try.

Dallion stood up as much as the limits of the ball would allow him.

Am I facing the firebird?

The sword's response was no.

Dallion turned slightly right. How about now?

The response was still no, but this time the harpsword gave adequate instructions so he was able to achieve what he wanted. Once done, Dallion slowly stepped back, causing the shield to roll along the chamber floor.

What's it doing now?

Apparently, the guardian outside paused at the ball's movement, tilted its head left, then right, then cautiously approached and started pecking again.

So far Dallion's hypothesis held true. Now it was time to test it.

Shield, I'll roll you a bit back, Dallion said. I want you to make me an opening and when I get out, close up again. Okay?

The harpsword conveyed Dallion's agreement.

With a nod, Dallion started his plan in motion. Moving slowly back, he waited until the connecting element was in the correct position. At that point, the ball cracked open like an accordion. When the opening grew large enough, Dallion jumped out. His instinct was to summon the harpsword, but he suppressed it. For this to work, he had to be unarmed.

The guardian redirected its focus to Dallion for a moment, but then quickly lost interest and continued pecking at the ball again.

It's interesting, isn't it? he asked, converting joy through his words. A pity you can't actually peck it.

Watching the beak dissolve in flame around the metal ball during each peck, then return to normal as the beak moved away was both strange and somewhat sweet.

You're just a little chick, aren't you? Firechick to be exact or whatever the proper term was.

Step by step, Dallion moved closer. At each stop he stopped, making sure not to scare or agitate the guardian. Then, after seeing there was no change, he would go on. When he was at arm's length away, Dallion slowly moved his hand forward and put it on the creature's plumage. The blue flames grew larger. Dallion could feel the heat in his hand. There was no damage, just pain. Slowly, the pain diminished until it subsided entirely. There was only warmth now.

You're a good little chick, aren't you? he asked.

The flames shrunk to their original size.

Youve no idea whats going on. Dallion rubbed the firebirds underbelly. Nil, how are firebirds born?

Not entirely. It was true that a guardian would disappear when defeated, thus marking the leveling up of the item, or in this case the clearing of the level. However, there was one exception. Dallion had seen instances of guardians being killed without any consequences to the overall item. Not if they had been killed in another fashion.

What about shelfeys? Dallion asked. Ive seen what happens, and unlike the stories the guild tells people, I know what that means. If you have a way of telling Adzorg or anyone else out there whats going on, I suggest you do it.

Give me a moment.

Take all the time you need. Dallion kept patting the guardian. His actions had caused the entire bird to start shrinking in size. Already it was two-thirds its original size and kept on getting smaller. And that was to be normal, for it wasnt the guardian that was supposed to be here it was its offspring.

Somehow, a chainling had found its way into the dagger, and fairly recently. Dallion speculated that it had attempted to transform the original firebird into a shelfey, but had likely died when the guardian had perished. Due to its nature, the guardian had done what firebirds did in the wild upon death created an offspring, and a very unusual one at that.

Thats why youre blue, isnt it? Dallion rubbed the birds head. It was about his size now. The chainling affected you in some way, but it didnt turn you into a shelfey.

The thought made him shiver. A flaming shelfey was more than he could handle. It would be like walking through a level full of fire. It was good to know that this world had some overarching defense mechanisms in place to keep from it from imminent disaster, at least most of the time.

You can return to normal now, shield, Dallion said as the firebird flapped onto his hand. Similar to Nox at the time, it enjoyed being petted something it had never experienced in its life or in any previous incarnation either.

Who whoo, the guardian squeaked, its call ringing through the chamber.

Yeah, yeah. Holding it, Dallion continued petting it with his free hand. Who did this indeed? I dont suppose you could tell me?

The owlet looked at him with its large emerald eyes, then melted into a puddle of flame in the palm of Dallions hand. Before he could blink, the flame ran up his arms, covering the entire upper part of his body.

MINOR HEAL

Your health has been increased by 5%

Red rectangles appeared, stacking up one after the other. Was that the creatures anomaly? Instead of causing damage it could only use its flames to remove damage? It wouldnt be the weirdest thing Dallon had experienced, not to mention quite useful.

For several seconds his health continued to increase by five percent until at one point the flames disappeared. Dallon was surrounded by darkness.

DAGGER Level 4 has been cleared!

Claim the focus that suits you best and continue to fulfil the DAGGERS destiny.

The chamber lit up. Soon after, the familiar five rectangles appeared. Dallon, however, wasnt in the mood for choosing. When it disappeared, the firebird had taken the joy that he had put in it through his words, making him slightly empty. Dallon felt that he had lost something, but couldnt tell what. Logically he was supposed to be happy not only had he cleared the level, but hed gotten his health restored an impossible feat even in this world. And still, he didnt.

Nil, what happens when I fulfil the daggers destiny? Dallon asked, even if he knew the answer.

However, in doing so, Dallon was also going to lose the daggers guardians. The copyette had mentioned that no one knew what happened to the guardians once that occurred, but it was certain that the firebird wouldnt be here.

Thanks, Dallon said, trying to voice as much joy as he could. As difficult as it was, the action seemed to have an effect.

Chapter 169: The Root of Evil

EMPATHIC CONNECTION

Valuing guardians above your own development is a calling, but it comes at a constant cost.

A blue rectangle replaced the attribute selection. Dallon glanced at it for a few moments, then waved it away. It had been a while since hed received an achievement, and this one was more cryptic than most.

COMPANION AZURE FIREBIRD CHICK

You have gained a Level 1 companion!

Newly hatched, the firebird has established a deep connection with you and will follow you both in the real and in any awakened world. The firebird will guard your awakening room, or attack any enemy you command in an awakening realm.

Unlike other members of its species, the azure firebird has the ability to heal wounds with its flames. The degree to which it heals depends on the firebirds level.

A second rectangle appeared, along with a small version of the ex-guardian. The only difference was that the bird no longer was a guardian; now it was another familiar.

Azure? Dallon stared at it. Having it back brought him some joy, though still not enough to take him to his previous emotional state. In future he would have to be careful how he used his emotions.

Pouring emotions into something else was clearly advantageous, though it was harsh to a persons own state.

The firebird let out a high-pitched chirp, then flapped its wings in front of Dallion. At this point Dallion had no choice but to crouch down and pet the creature on the head. The creatures reaction was childish in a very adult way. After enjoying the pets for a few seconds, it attempted to push away Dallions hand with its wings. Comically, the flame would pass through his hand, achieving little more than the equivalent of a very localized breeze. Being made entirely of flame had its limitations.

While the firebird was playing, Dallions other familiar slowly made his way from the tunnel outside to the center of the chamber. Head stretched to its maximum, the crackling sniffed at the creature several times, before taking a step back.

Of course, now you show up. Dallion sighed. He could have used Nox during the actual fight. Although, thinking about it, there probably wasnt much the crackling would be able to do.

Nox, this is Lux, Dallion said. The cracking didnt seem one bit impressed. Lux, this is your senior. Dallion pushed the firebird gently towards the crackling. Doing so with a full palm proved possiblelike slowly nudging a bubble of hot air.

On a personal level, Dallion was happy that the guardian hadnt disappeared. His gamer mind, though, was already running on overdrive. With this new creature he now had attack and heal abilities at his disposal. Both would prove quite useful in the battle to come, even if both creatures were at level one. The main thing was not to allow them to get harmed.

Nil, can you take care of them for me?

Healing flames, Nil, Dallion said. Its made of healing flames.

Oh, if thats the case I guess everything is alright, isnt it? You realize how this looks, right? You have a crackling and a blue firebird, most likely the result of chainling involvement. Some might claim that you are closer to the Crippled Star than is healthy for an awakened.

I dont see how having familiars could be considered a bad thing. The notion made Dallion think of his grandfather. When he had set out to make a chainling, what exactly had he done? Had he set one loose from a sphere item? Or had he sacrificed someone to achieve the effect? The notion made Dallions stomach churn.

They arent but Ill tell you what I keep telling my students: your mind has a limited capacity, so dont fill it up with nonsense, or with familiars as your case might be.

Point taken. Any luck with contacting Adzorg?

Dear boy, this is a rather complicated process that has no guarantees of success. I would have you know that two-way echo communication is an endeavor that has been attempted by scholars for hundreds of years. Even the

Any luck? Dallion interrupted.

Im not certain. I sent a message, but my original hasnt noticed. Possibly one of the other captains will. Its just a matter of time.

Okay, you two, into the library, he said to the familiars.

Nox was first to disappear with an elegant leap. The firebird was next, poofing out like a candle flame at a birthday party. With that, Dallion went on to the final level.

To Dallions surprise, the starting chamber of the fifth level was way smaller than he expected. A fraction of the size of the previous one, it loomed more like an entrance lobby than anything else. The faint light coming from the level above was enough to make all the walls clearly visible, as well as the entrance to the tunnel moving on.

Is there anyone out there? Dallion asked, his words resonating with calm. Anyone out there who could hear me?

There were no creatures visible the first few hundred feet. After close to a minute, Dallion stopped. Having no enemies wasnt unusual, although from a logical perspective it meant only one thing: whoever, or whatever the guardian was, they had made sure that the level was barren.

After a short while the tunnel took a sharp turn, then continued curving along an arc. In his mind, Dallion could see it circling the entrance area in a reverse spiral. That was unfortunate since it limited his field of vision and made it far more difficult to tell if there were creatures lurking further in.

Lux, come out. At this point, it was pointless walking in the dark. It was far more comfortable to actually see where he was going.

The firebird appeared on his shoulder a preferred place for familiars, it seemed and just stood there perched calmly, as if it were taking a nap. The contrast from Noxs playfulness was much appreciated in the situation.

In the light, Dallion was able to get a better look at the walls. While not entirely smooth, they were obviously no longer made of rock, but of what seemed like dark red smoked glass. Rough in texture, they felt pleasantly warm, almost organic.

What do you think, Lux? Dallion asked. Different from the level you knew?

The firebird yawned. It didnt seem interested in the least. Either that or Dallion had interrupted its nap time.

Nil, is this normal?

I thought all sphere items were special.

Thats true in a manner of speaking. While such items are quite different from the items we know today, thus the separate category for them, they still are divided into ordinary and extraordinary. Whine awakening items could be treated as extraordinary in the sense that they actually allow level

increases, the daggers are nothing much. If they were, we wouldnt be using them for selection trials.

That made sense, and still Dallion felt that something was off. He couldnt put his finger on it, but it was there, staring him in the face and mocking him.

If I clear another dagger, will I raise another five levels? Dallion leaned to the outer wall, trying to get a better view of what expected him further on. As before, there were no new surprises.

Wishful thinking, Im afraid. And the topic of multiple scholar studies. Apparently, the sphere items share a leveling system of their own. Completing one would allow you to increase your level by five regardless of your current state. At the same time, completing one awakening item is considered completing them all. The only way to raise your level more is to find a ten-level awakening item, and so far, there have been only six found in the entire empire.

Interesting system. Dallion summoned his harpsisword. With each step, he was getting more and more jumpy. By his estimates he had made two revolutions and a half around the starting point. Something deep inside told him that he didnt have much to go before reaching the guardian chamber.

Interesting is hardly the word Id use. Anomalous is more to the point.

Im there with you. Let me know if Adzorg gets your message.

The further Dallion went, the slower he became. By the time the guardian chamber entrance became visible, he was hesitating at every step. At this point it wasnt only his inner sense that was alarming him, his music skills also showed him echoes of void and chaos flickering along the walls, like venomous cracks. The last time he had experienced that, he had fought a chainling.

Nox, Dallion whispers. I think Ill need you on this one.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion recited the names of the Seven Moons and went past the threshold. To his surprise, the final guardian chamber was lit up, though not in the way he had expected a sphere item to be. Instead, there were touches all over the walls, burning in a whitish-yellow light. That was not the shocking part; that honor was reserved for the outline of smothering ash in the center of the chamber, along with the person standing over it someone that Dallion knew quite well.

Art? Dallion asked in disbelief, uncertain if he wasnt dealing with another copyette. Seeing the lack of emotions emanating from the creature, however, it was more likely that he was dealing with a chainling.

Oh, youre early, Arthurows replied in a calm fashion. Sorry about the mess. Didnt know youd deal with the last level so fast. With a wave of his hand, the ash outline was gone. So, how have you been, Dal? Arthurows smiled. Youve gotten yourself a second familiar. Thats quite rare. Im not sure I know anyone with two familiars outside the capital. Then again, I cant be everywhere, so who knows?

What are you doing here, Art? Dallion held his harpsisword firmly. You werent in the room when I entered the dagger.

Such deductive skills, the other started a slow clam. Youre a real Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock Holmes? That wasnt something a person from this world was supposed to know not unless the person came from Earth as well.

Oh, but where are my manners? Arthurows snapped his fingers. A white rectangle appeared above his head.

THE TWISTED STAR

Species: Wouldnt you like to know?

Class: Wouldnt you like to know?

Statistics: Wouldnt you like to know?

Skills: Wouldnt you like to know?

Weak spots: Wouldnt you like to know?

Dallion felt as if ice cubes had sprouted in his stomach. All this time he had thought that Arthurows was a sneak and slacker, but never once had he considered that he could be a Star. The mere notion made Dallion feel dread, as if he were in the presence of a demon, and as far as this world was concerned that could be the case.

There wasnt much mentioned about the Star. Dallion knew enough from the fragments hed heard or read in the ring library to be afraid. Allegedly, the Star had managed to be the downfall of entire kingdoms, even species.

Fear gripped hold of Dallions conscience. It was only to the harpriswords vibrating strings that it somewhat released him.

Dont be so afraid, its not like Im all-powerful, Arthurows laughed. At least not yet.

Youre the Crippled? Dallion swallowed. What about Art?

Art was an unfortunate kid that asked for too much while he should have known better. Sadly, he passed away nine years ago. I took his place. Come to think about it, youve done the exact same thing. The star took a step forward, at which point Dallion instantly retreated, blade pointing the Arthurows direction. After all, didnt you take over the body of a person in this world when you came from Earth? I doubt theyre too happy about that. But hey, its not like they can complain. He laughed.

You created the chainlings in the rescue mission.

Correct. And I did it just for you.

Dallion took another step back.

Do you know what they call people from another world here? the Star asked. No? Soul confused, irregular, wildcards I personally like to call them a pain in the ass. Your very existence is a problem. Most of your kind join the nobility or the hunters, which makes it much more difficult for me in the long run. Your case, though, is special. You Arthurows pointed at Dallion really managed to piss me off. Ive plans for this city. Plans that youve already started to mess up.

I dont even know you. Dallion felt part of his confidence returning, all thanks to the music of the harpsisword.

You dont have to know someone to mess things up. Its enough that you started going on explorations. When I made you mess up the selection trial, that was supposed to be the end of it. You were supposed to accept defeat and start going on sanitation missions. But no, you had to have your little arrangement with Vend, then join in as a packrat.

You made me mess up my selection?

Arthurows laughed.

Where do you think your sudden burst of confidence came from? Because you were doing oh so well in the previous levels. Level six, barely managed to pull through with a group and you thought youd make it to here on your own? Or did you think youre the only one who could influence people? Either way, it ends here.

Thinking back, a lot of Dallions problems were linked to Arthurows in some way. The mission failure, the deal with the general, the chainlings during the rescue job, the lieutenants attitude during the interview a while back Dallion had even told Arthurows when he was about to go to the awakening shrine. It was entirely possible that the Star had had a hand in him getting mugged, although wouldnt it have been easier to outright kill him? For an entity of his strength, there were ample opportunities.

You cant kill me, can you? Dallion voiced the question in his mind.

The star narrowed his eyes.

The Moons are preventing you, arent they?

COMBAT INITIATED

Chapter 170: Combat Limitations

Fighting a Star wasnt something Dallion thought could possibly happen. Up to now he had thought of it as a malevolent entity that had no actual form in the world. And still here he was, engaged in battle with it.

Go ahead, Arthurows said. You have the first move.

Dallion hesitated. Was this a trap? So far nearly all guardians were the ones who attacked first. After everything that Arthurows had done to get Dallion in trouble, it would be out of character to convert to fair play just now.

You cant fight against the entire guild. Dallion used his music skills, though this time instead of targeting the enemy, he targeted himself with a dose of calm and courage. Theyre watching us right now.

Whatever should I do? Arthurows laughed. A pity all they can see is smoke.

Smoke? Nil? Dallion asked. There was no answer. Strange, considering Dallion had never stopped hearing the haprsisword. Harp?

You wont win a battle if you count on the strength of others. Didnt I tell you that before?

Dallion had no memory of such a conversation taking place. Thanks to his increased mind, though, he spotted something the Star seemed wary of the harpsword, quite possibly ever since the selection trial. All the subtle remarks that he had made to Dallion about it, the introduction to that shark, the general, even the mugging. The thieving fury had never targeted the coins. She had to have been there for the sword. Apparently, if Dallion lost it, he would cease to be a threat, even if he managed to somehow pass the selection trial without it.

He can't kill me, Dallion said to himself. However, defeat in an awakened realm wasn't killing. All he had to do was mess with the emblem, and Dallion could end up with his awakened power sealed. Or maybe he already had?

Instinct made Dallion touch his chest at the spot where the guild emblem used to be in real life. Arthurows smiled. So, he had done something to it.

And before you ask, I won't accept a draw, or a surrender, the Star said. Just in case you were wondering.

There was no choice. A battle it had to be, but not the battle Arthurows would expect.

Green and red markers appeared around Dallion, presenting several attack approaches. All of them were easy to execute. Arthurows had left himself wide open. That was precisely why Dallion didn't pick any of them, deciding to play it by ear.

Without hesitation, Dallion charged forward, his feet matching the footprints completely. Halfway through the series, the Star made its move. Instead of retreating and counterattacking as Dallion had imagined he would, Arthurows moved directly forward, aiming to interrupt the series, while also striking Dallion in the neck. The actions were swift and elegant, but nowhere as fast as Dallion feared they would be. Given the likely vast difference in levels that was hardly right unless Arthurows was playing with him.

Dallion's armadillo shield extended to protect him from the attack. At the same time, Dallion twisted to evade, continuing the guard streak. The whole thing felt a lot like his fighting style in Dherma. There, he had been so weak that he relied on the buckler for attack; in fact, he didn't even have attack skills back then and had to rely on improvisation.

Time slowed down, allowing Dallion to go on with his second set of defense moves. Arthurows didn't seem overly concerned. The openings were still present, tempting Dallion to strike. However, he resisted. Circling the Star, he completed a second guard sequence, then a third. As before, each next one became easier and easier to execute. Finally, Dallion achieved what he had aimed for all along the fifth sequence.

This was the point at which the escape option was supposed to appear. Having learned a lot since his fight against the Dherma village chief, Dallion already had determined that his only goal would be to escape. There would be no attempts to use the time freeze to attack, or any other funny business. The moment the green rectangle appeared, he was going to get out of the trial and let the entire guild know. Alas for him, the escape rectangle never showed. Confused, he went on with the next guard series.

With each next completion time slowed down to a crawl, and still no escape option was present.

What the heck! Dallion said under his breath, staring at the empty space in front of his head. At that precise moment, Arthurows attacked.

In Dallions mind he saw five instances of the Star going at him. In some cases, he summoned a dagger from nowhere, in others he had summoned a sword. In some cases, he went high, in some low. Dallion panicked. There was no way to tell which attack to tackle, so he did his best to guard against three of the attacker images.

MEDIUM WOUND

Your health has decreased by 10%

A dagger went past Dallions shield and pierced his chest inches from the throat. Quite fortunately, an inch higher and the wound would have been critical.

MINOR HEAL

Your health has increased by 5%

A second rectangle appeared as Dallion jumped away. As he did, Nox leapt at Arthurows. The attack seemed well timed, but was easily avoided and followed by a quick counterattack. Thankfully, the crackling had a sense of what was going on and vanished in the air as the tip of the dagger came towards it.

Still letting others fight your battles? Arthurows asked, a note of hidden anger in his voice.

Thats what we mortals do. Dallion replied.

Against a star hed gladly take every advantage he could get. Levels aside, Arthurows had ignored the effects of the guard series as if they were nothing. Not only that, but his attacks were of the multiple type, making Dallion guess how he should protect himself. It was like playing with loaded dice.

MINOR HEAL

Your health has increased by 5%

Fast healing as well? You really want me to get serious. Arthurows smiled, letting go of his dagger. The weapon disappeared into nothingness. Or maybe youd like to make a deal?

Dallion summoned the harpsisword with his left hand. The shield made holding the weapon uncomfortable and aiming twice as difficult, but he wasnt letting go of the harpsisword. As far as he could tell, that was the only major advantage he held in this fight.

A bolt split the air, aimed at Arthurowss torso and was avoided with ease.

Ill surrender the fight, Arthurows went on. Ill even stop hounding you. You get to keep your harpsisword, your shield, your guild status. All you have to do is just give me an oath that you wont join Marchs expedition.

March's expedition? Dallion blinked. It was the first time he'd heard of that. Thinking back, he went through all his interactions with the captain, then with everyone else. He had no memory of such a reference.

Why do you think you're the focus of her interest? People out of this world excel in party fighting. Why do you think your grandfather rose up the ranks so quickly?

Dallion froze.

What do you know about my grandfather?

A wicked smile appeared on Arthurows face. Dallion had just given him ammunition to use against him.

I know everything about your grandfather since he came here. And yes, I know he's from Earth as well. And I'll tell you all about it. Just make an oath that if March offers you a spot on her expedition, which might not happen, mind you, you'll refuse. Do that and you get to enjoy your insignificant life in this fantasy world, and get information about your grandfather to boot. Who knows, maybe it will help you avoid the pitfalls he went through.

There was no way to tell if the Star was being sincere or not. From what Dallion had seen, it was entirely possible that Arthurows was reading his mind and making promises he couldn't keep. Dallion's Earth grandfather used to say that the first rule about making a deal with a devil was not to. This seemed to apply in full force here.

How do I know you're not lying? Dallion asked. I can't see any of your emotions.

Nice try, but no. You don't get to see that. Let me just say that the oaths to the Moons are absolute. If it helps you feel better, I'll make an oath to keep my end of the bargain. Unlike the general.

Dallion gritted his teeth. He felt his anger peak, even if he couldn't do anything about it. He was in a bad situation and there didn't seem any way around it. He could try to fight, of course, maybe even risk getting his powers sealed in order to warn the guild. After all, he had seen that a person's powers could be unsealed.

The more he thought about it, the more he could see only two options: selfishly agree to the offer, or sacrifice himself for the guild and whatever else might follow. Seeing that the Star had transformed people into chainlings only to stop Dallion from joining March's party, there was little doubt he would do far worse to Nerosal, maybe the entire Tamin Empire. Sacrificing himself would help a lot of others, and still

No one will find out, Arthurows continued. I'll add that to my oath. And I really mean no one. None of the not-directly-telling and legal loophole crap you're familiar with. A guaranteed oath to the Moons that our little deal will remain nothing but a one-time transaction that will remain hidden from the world.

That scum! He was starting to sound just like the copyette! That guardian too had made a lot of long and logical promises, only to try and trick Dallion to a really bad deal. If Dallion hadn't caught on he

What about Nox and Lux? Dallion asked.

Nox and

Before Arthurows could finish his sentence, Dallion pounced forward. Getting the hint, Nox also appeared on his shoulder, leaping at the Star as well. In his mind, Dallion split instances of himself attacking the enemy in three different ways. As he did, he also mentally saw Arthurows counter them all. Apparently, splitting wasn't exclusive to attacking alone. To no surprise, when Dallion went through with one of the attack options, his attack was easily blocked. However, Nox's wasn't.

MINOR HIT

A red rectangle appeared in the air after the crackling had managed to sink its claws in the Star's left shoulder. Similar to before, Nox then leapt back to Dallion's awakening realm.

Surprised, Arthurows retreated a dozen feet, then looked at his shoulder. Disbelief streamed from him like blood, trickling from beneath the void cocoon that wrapped around him. It only lasted for a moment, but Dallion was able to get a glimpse.

While the battle took place here, Arthurows was no stronger than a typical level twelve awakened. The Star might have defeated the previous guardian easily, but the guardian was not a person. According to the rules of the awakened item, it was the challenge who was always given the advantage. The Seven Moons had decreed it, and everyone else, even the Twisted Star, had to follow those rules.