

Leveling up 181

Chapter 181: Gremlin Settlement

A whole world of stone pillars. There was something alluring in the simplicity of it all, possibly because it was so different from the city of Nerosal. In a way, it provided the freedom of the wilderness with the inherent dangers. Then again, the place came with its own very specific set of dangerscracks. Unlike sphere items or minor areas, though, here they were considerably more advanced and better organized. Unlike Dallions previous experiences, they were in plain view, gathered in small clusters that could pass for villages.

This place hasnt seen mending in ages, Veil whispered.

There was no arguing about that. According to the rectangles, the area was at seventy-four percent. Given the scale of things, though, that didnt mean as much.

Ranged weapons, Dallion noted.

The garden cracks had the appearance of gremlins that had used the local materials to create themselves weapons, armor, even structures. The fascinating part was that they had done so in a way that boggled the imagination. Initially, Dallion had thought of them as cracks in human formwhich, in appearance, they wereso he expected them to behave like people. Not only didnt they, but they also changed the local laws of physics.

The fires that the gremlin-cracks had made were black as much as they were and had the ability to melt stone into malleable materials from which they had made anything from cloth to shields. Dallion couldnt help but be impressed by their progress. Given enough time, there was no telling how much they would advance. In centuries it was possible they made their own industrial revolution, although by doing so they would also ruin the realm and the real-world garden as well.

I count over a hundred. All of them were the same age and lacked any sexual characteristics.

Ive dealt with more, Veil said.

Liar, Gloria whispered.

A tribe of a hundred armed cracklins and judging by the plumes of smoke in the distance, there were at least half a dozen other settlements such as this one. Defeating them wasnt going to be a simple matter of rushing in.

Ill go and lure them out, Dallion said. When they start charging Gloria will start taking them out from a distance, while Veil keeps them from reaching me. When all of them have gathered, Ill change my tune to give us an advantage.

There was a moment of silence.

Depending on how it goes with this settlement well see if our plan needs changing for the rest.

Thats actually quite a good plan, Gloria said after a while. You havent lost your touch. She smiled, gently patting his shoulder.

Yeah, you always were a big brain guy, but Ill catch up to you. Veil said. Lets do this.

Casually, Dallion started his way towards the gremlin settlement, leaving the protection of the nearest stone spire. If the gremlins took notice of him, they didn't show it in their behavior, continuing with running their settlement as usual putting more rocks to the fire as it were.

Dallion reached out and summoned his harpsisword. The weapon emerged in his hands, ready for battle.

Not yet, Harp, Dallion whispered, and started playing.

The melody could be described as the chorus of an epic ballad full of fire and bloodlust. Matching the rhythm to that of the gremlins, Dallion increased their aggression more and more, adding a pinch of annoyance. Initially there seemed to be no effect, and then the floodgates broke. In an instant the settlement went from calm to a cauldron of uncontrollable rage. With roars and snarls, the cracklings rushed out, some not even bothering to put on armor. Seeing that, Dallion intensified his playing.

Within seconds, the first of the pack had halved the distance. At that moment, Gloria stepped in. Bolts flew through the air, taking out two cracklings at a time. The creatures popped like balloons, leaving puffs of black smoke behind. One would think that seeing their fellow gremlins killed would cause the others to falter, but it had the opposite effect. Seeing space open up in front of them, the ones behind rushed to fill it up.

By the time the first gremlins got remotely close to Dallion, over a dozen had been eliminated. Waiting no longer, Veil rushed in, a sword in each hand. This was his moment to shine. Like a hurricane he made his way to the mass of gremlins and did a triple circular slash.

The tune suddenly changed. The notes of aggression were replaced by sudden fear, causing the cracks to freeze for a second. In the past, Dallion would have relied on this trick to grant his team a free opening. However, that was a very slow method. Instead, he increased the intensity of fear and hopelessness, crippling their will to fight.

The process was gradual. The first few seconds the gremlins continued as before. Then their attacks became slower, then weaker, then for some stopped altogether as they fell to their knees. It was just like some of the animated war dramas Dallion had watched back on Earth. To see it in person, or better yet to be the one responsible for it, filled him with mixed feelings.

The fight continued for another minute. By the end there were only three people left on the battlefield, if it could even be called a battlefield.

I have to hand it to you, you know your stuff, Veil said. Dallion could see envy and admiration echoing within him. This was a lot easier than the way we did things back home.

What hes trying to say is that hes impressed that it took us minutes to do something that took us about a day, Gloria added as she emerged from her sniping position.

It never was a full day! Veil countered.

It was if you include the resting afterwards.

Okay, maybe a day. When we get back, Im definitely talking to your mother. Veil looked at Dal. To think she could do this. Heck, we can get Dherma to a level four in no time! We could even

Thats not a good idea, Gloria cut him short. A moment later, Dallion got an understanding nod.

His mother had been through a lot, all because of the former village chief. Having Luors ask her to do things for the good of the village wasnt the best approach, especially since it concerned fighting. Once the festival was over, maybe it was a good idea for Dallion to go back for a few weeks to see how she was doing to see how all of his family were doing. Being from Earth, he only half considered them as family, that is to say he had the memories and experiences hed had with them since this version of him was born, but even so he couldnt fully accept them as real. Even now they were a few steps away from being really well-written characters in an MMO he had joined.

Anyway, lets move on. Dallion changed the topic. We have a few more to get clear before the realm is mended.

Veil and Gloria gave him a weird glance.

You havent been doing any area cleaning, have you? Gloria asked. To mend something, we need to destroy their settlement. Killing off the cracklings is not enough. If we just go, theyll be back in a few days.

This was slightly embarrassing. Got you, Dallion smiled.

Destroying the gremlin settlement proved to be easier than it sounded, and also very different. The siblings didnt bother harming any of the structures. Instead, they went to the central campfire and slashed the black flame out of existence.

Realm section mended!

Overall completion 78%

The same was done to all the smaller cooking fires that were within some of the buildings. Once all of them were taken care of, transformation took place. The dirt and soot that covered the area

disappeared, leaving only perfect grayness behind. What was more, the smoke that had been continuously trickling up towards the sky had vanished for good.

Realm section mended!

Overall completion 81%

Its not a lot of percent, Dallion noted.

Look on the bright side. Veil gave him a pat on the back. This means we have all the more to kill.

Thats not a good thing, Dallion grumbled.

To be honest, that wasnt Dallion even considered thinking about until now. He had to admit it gave a whole new meaning to the term old abandoned house. Come to think of it, could the same be true back on Earth? Maybe item and area guardians existed there as well, but it was the people who werent awakened.

While area guardians cant help you directly, they could always make things more difficult for people that wish you harm. At least while youre in that area.

The battle at the second gremlin settlement was no different from the first. The gremlins were half in number and far worse equipped, making for a quick and decisive victory. Getting rid of the flames, though, only increased the realms complete state by three percent, suggesting that this task could well be more complicated than Dallion initially thought.

Do you think we can manage to get it done in a day? he asked, as they made their way to the next plume of smoke.

Sure. Veil replied with complete confidence.

No, Gloria said sharply. Rushing things is pointless. The garden wont go anywhere. After two more settlements, were going to take a break and explore more of the city. Maybe we can do five more in the afternoon.

Fighting them is not that difficult. As he said it, Dallion felt the first signs of hunger tickling his stomach. We havent gotten any damage so far.

Its not about the fighting. Its about the walking, Gloria said. Look around. We can see five plumes of smoke, which is about the same number as when we started. These are only the big ones. Theres no telling how many small fires with a few cracklings there are. And even if we assume these are all, how long do you think it will take us to reach them all? Im not wasting my time walking for days and nights just so you can say you have cleared this area in a day!

She had definitely got Dallion therethat was exactly what he was hoping to do. Not only would that leave him a lot of free time to take on other guild jobs, it was going to be extremely satisfactory to see Vends expression when Dallion told him he was already done.

So, youre alright for another two fights? Dallion asked.

At most, the girl stressed.

What if I know of a way to get all of them to attack us at the same time?

Chapter 182: Harp Wound

As far as the world was concerned, cracklings were the equivalent of tooth decay. The stronger they became, the more the realm they were a part of decayed in the real world. If nothing was done, they would eventually become strong enough to overpower the guardian of the realm. When that happened, there was no leveling up. Instead, the item itself would die along with its guardian, leaving the cracklings to reign in the pieces or fizzle out into nothingness. The last remained unclear, or as Nil used to say scholars were still having arguments on the topic. That explained why the guardian of the well was hiding. Unable to fight the creatures, all the guardian could do was seek shelter, hoping that would slow the cracks progress enough for an awakened to appear and cleanse the realm of their presence.

Having a crackling familiar, though, was something else. Nox had helped Dallion a number of times, not to mention he was instrumental in unsealing the awakened powers of his mother. And that was before Dallion had made him a guardian. Now the puma was able to help him in the real world, causing cracks in any surface the tip of his dagger came into contact with. Dallion had tested it out and on a few items, always careful not to break them completely and mending them afterwards, of course. However, it felt reassuring knowing that if push came to shove, he had that power at his disposal. For the current situation, Nox had another quality that made him far more usefulhis ability to find other cracks.

This isnt a joke, right? Veil asked from the top of a stone pillar.

Theyll get here, Dallion replied, sitting on the ground below. Trust me.

I really have no idea what youre trying to do, Gloria whispered. But as long as it pisses off my brother Im willing to help.

Wow. I dont remember you two being like this before.

We werent. Gloria looked at the horizon. Growing up under grandpa wasnt the easiest experience. Everyone knew what they needed to do and just waited for the right time so they could do it. Everyones life was carefully planned and all I could hope for was to hope to slightly change the direction in which it would continue. We never were a family. In a way, we still arent.

Dallion remained silent. The fall of the village chief had caused a lot of changes, and while most were for the better, some werent.

At least here were two ordinary people in the big city. Here we can be siblings again.

I wouldn't call you ordinary. Dallion smiled. And as the tips have shown, neither do most in Nerosal. See anything yet? he shouted at Veil.

Another plume of smoke has vanished.

That made three. Admittedly, it was taking Nox longer than Dallion would have hoped, but given the size of this realm, he was doing quite well. And unlike Gloria, the crackling had no intention of complaining. Getting the chance to run about in the open and claw on things freely was more than enough to make him feel happy. The only fly in the ointment was Lux. The firebird was vital for Dallion's play, very much to Nox's displeasure. Despite everything, the puma cub still viewed Lux as an annoying little brother he was stuck with. In this case, though, there was no alternative.

Even if you get all the gremlins here, that won't change much, Gloria said. There's still days of walking to their camps, and if we don't destroy those by morning

Don't worry about that. My plan is to make their settlements come to us as well.

If you say so. Gloria shrugged.

It wouldn't hurt you to explain things from time to time, dear boy

, Nil said.

It's better this way.

If you say so. Personally, I am not amused having a firebird sleep in the alchemy section of the library, even if its flames are harmless.

Dallion decided not to ask. Taking care of Lux was going to be a whole thing on its own. On that note, he was going to start saving up to buy a spheric trinket at one of the guild auctions. A ring would be the ideal choice, although Dallion had no intention of being picky. Any item that he could carry around in the real world would suffice. That way, he would worry less if he happened to have another visit from the fury thief or another member of the mirror pool.

One more down, Veil shouted. You got to tell me how you're doing that!

Patience. You'll know once you're a double digit, Dallion lied. He wasn't sure whether people could see Nox or not, but at this stage he preferred if fewer people were aware of his existence. You can come down, by the way. We'll be able to see them as they get nearer.

After another few minutes Veil did just that. Still skeptical, he joined the other two on the ground as they waited. And while they did so, Dallion kept on following the progress of his minion. While being linked to a familiar didn't let him see things from Nox's eye, the cracking gave him a pretty good account of what was going on.

As instructed, Nox had started by rounding up the small groups of gremlins. Finding them proved easy enough, and thanks to the fire-propelled speed that Lux provided, they could be reached in a matter of minutes. From then on, things became banally simple: Nox would attack the flamecausing all instances of cracklings to merge into one entity then dash to the next group and repeat.

Dallion still had a lot to learn about the nature of cracks and cracklings, but there were a few things he knew from personal experience: they were territorial, loathed being disturbed, and when threatened always merged together. Each plume of smoke disappearing indicated another group

merging together to deal with the guardian attacking them. From here on, it was only a matter of time before a single entity came this way a very large entity.

As much as Dallion was pleased with the results, the idea wasn't his. What mattered, though, was that it seemed to be working.

I think we should get ready, Dallion said, as only one plume of smoke remained visible. Once that was gone, Nox was going to make his way towards the group, bringing a wave of cracklings behind him.

Gloria, you should go up there, he said.

What about you? the girl asked. You're the one with the magic harp.

I won't be using it to play music.

Nox came as predicted, venturing out of the garden realm as soon as it got within sight of Dallion. Given that Dallion's perception was fifty percent higher than that of the rest, there was a good chance that the crackling and firebird engine remained unnoticed.

Get ready. Dallion held up his harp's word.

I don't see anything, Veil said.

Within moments that changed as a wave of blackness flowed towards them as a title wave. However, it did not splash over them. Instead, a creature began to emerge, slowly taking form as the black substance rose up.

Facing all sorts of enemies in the sphere items, Dallion thought he had an idea how large merged beings could be. The truth was that he didn't. The gremlin before them was larger than the stone pillars that filled the realm. Compared to it, Veil and Dallion were little more than gerbils.

So, this is how they take down a guardian, Dallion said. Fought anything this big before?

Pretty much. You?

Once. The fifth level guardian in the Dherma awakening shrine was even larger than this. However, the method Dallion had used to win back then wasn't something he could repeat. There can't be more than a few thousand of them, right?

With a laugh, Veil dashed forward. Moments later, Dallion did the same.

COMBAT INITIATED

Bolts split the air above them, dealing the obligatory two damage per second to the massive creature. On its part, the creature responded. A giant fist moved towards Veil at the speed a normal gremlin would attack. This remained one of the things Dallion couldn't get used to the relation between size and speed in this world went against expectations he had built for decades back on Earth.

Instinctively, Dallion played a chord, if only to slow the monsters attack. The action worked, delaying the attack by half a second enough for Veil to evade getting splatted on the ground. What was more, the blonde managed to inflict a few wounds on the gremlins hand. It was interesting to note that his attack style changed completely. Veil was no longer aiming for long slashes, preferring to go for more strikes of lower intensity.

This sword is something else! Veil shouted, cutting off the gremlins thumb. The black substance quickly restored the loss, though that did little to stop the blond from hacking on.

Taking advantage of the situation, Dallion ran to the gremlins foot, heading towards the ankle. They had been doing pretty well against a monster this size. Then again, one good hit on the creatures part was all it took to cast them out.

Time for our part, Dallion said, then drove the harpsisword halfway in.

Before the gremlin could react, Dallion played a chord. Pain and damage usually went hand in hand, causing smaller enemies to give up. In this case, Dallion wasnt using pain, he was using destruction.

A roar filled the air as the monster turned around to find the new source of pain. Dallion let go of the harpsisword and dashed back. Given the effects she had on the scylla it was likely she would keep continuously draining life from the monster until it became an easy target to kill.

Suddenly a sharp note of pain resonated in Dallions awakening realm. It belonged to the harpsisword. At that moment, Dallion summoned the sword back to him. Then he saw it. A small hairline crack had formed on the blade. Made visible thanks to Dallions forging skills, it was like a blister on the otherwise flawless surface.

Up to now, all the enemies that Dallion had fought had targeted him, making him forget that weapons suffered damage as well. The make and level of the harpsisword had made him forget that up till now, but clearly his gear wasnt invulnerable.

Lux, heal her!

As much as Dallion would have liked to follow up on the results of that, the battle was still raging. Annoyed by the pain in its ankle. Tendrils shot out from its entire body, aiming towards both sources of annoyance.

Shield! Dallion shouted, holding the armadil forward.

The shield extended, creating a protective semi-sphere moments before the tendrils reached Dallion. A series of strikes pushed him back several steps, though thankfully didnt cause any damage. A distance away, Veil had also been the subject to such treatment. He, however, dealt with it in an entirely different manner. Taking a medium wound, not only did he keep slashing, but charged closer to the monster so as to double his effectiveness.

From what Im seeing, I would estimate somewhere between a tenth and a fifth. Its difficult to tell due to that last attack.

A loud chirp suggested that the order was understood.

Chapter 183: A Two and a Five

What the heck is this?! Veil yelled as the azure firebird flew near him.

Its my familiar! Dallion yelled back. Dont hurt it!

The last sentence was said moments too late to keep Veil from slashing through the creature. Fortunately, the blade passed through the flame, causing no harm whatsoever. Unphased, Lux perched on Veils head. The healing started immediately restoring the blonds health in the familiar five percent increments.

MINOR WOUND

Your Health has been decreased by 5%

A tendril sneaked past the edge of the shield, piercing Dallion in the right shoulder. It took a single slash to cut it off before it could do further damage, but it was evident that the cracklings were learning.

The trios efforts had managed to reduce the overall size of their enemy by a third, yet they had started suffering damage as well. To make matters more challenging, music attacks didnt have the same effect they did to the initial crowd of gremlins. Apparently, size was a factor the emotions vibrating within the monster were too strong, negating anything Dallion attempted. One way to change that was to stick his harpsisword in it and perform a music attack then, but he wasnt going to; not after what had happened the last time.

This thing is wild! Veil grinned, pushing forward like a walking meat grinder.

Dont be reckless! Dallion shouted, immediately becoming aware of the irony. That isnt an excuse to stop defending!

Then again, a berserker with a constant life-gain was a vicious combination. In his mind, Dallion started going through possibilities. As things stood, the battle was likely to last at least another ten intense minutes, which was a lot considering the amount of effort exerted on everyones part. Gathering all cracks in one place was a good approach when it came to saving time, so now that they were here, the best way to continue was to split them up again. Dallion couldnt manage that on his own at his level, but there was no reason for him to go at it alone. This was a team job and in a team job all it took was for one person to remain standing at the end for the entire team to win.

Gloria! Dallion shouted, pulling further back. Ill need you in close combat. Well do a combo.

Alright. There was a note of hesitation in her voice, though not as much as the trust in him.

Veil, same thing.

Im already fighting up close. Veil hacked at the gremlins leg, pretty much ignoring the tendrils piercing him. At this rate even Lux wasnt enough to fully restore his health.

Combo attack! Dallion shouted, annoyed. We go for the waist and split it in two. Wait for my signal!

On its face the plan sounded absurd, and that is precisely why Dallion thought it would work. All he had to do was calculate the time it would take Gloria to reach the gremlin so he could coordinate the attack. Thanks to his improved mind, the calculations were easy and quite visual, allowing him to visualize the entire thing.

Now! Dallion shouted. Shield, contract!

Simultaneously, all three members of the group started their way to the gremlins waist. Dallion was no exception charging forward. Seeing that he was no longer protected by the shield, clusters of tendrils darted his way. This was precisely what Dallion was hoping for more attention on him meant less on Gloria and Veil. Also, he had one trick up his sleeve, they didnt.

In Dallions mind, three instances ran towards the monster, each following a slightly different route. A few of these instances suffered medium wounds, pierced by upcoming tendrils. Dallion simply chose the versions of himself that evaded the attack, then repeated the process.

Dallion didnt reply. He knew that perfectly well, just as he knew that at the current rate, he would rather take a few wounds while charging than engage in a battle of attrition. Judging by himself, if he was already starting to get tired, there was no way the rest of his team would be any better. It was an all-or-nothing moment.

Seconds later, Nox made his move. Leaping from the spot he was hiding at, the crackling clawed its way up the mountain of a gremlin, headed directly for the eyes. As expected, the monster redirected all of its attention to remove the nuisance from its face. By doing so, it had left itself open.

The three awakened converged on the gremlin at almost the precise moment. Gloria was the first. Ignored by the gremlin until the last few moments, she easily evaded its attacks using her acrobatic skills, then slashed at its torso with a spin strike apparently attack styles ran in the family. Dallion was second, cutting his way through the thicket of tendrils, then leaping clumsily up so as to perform a strike. Even with the vigorous training he had gone through, the lack of athletic or acrobatic skills was showing.

Veil was the last of the bunch. In his case, being the closest was a definite disadvantage. Having to deal with the gremlins kicks and punches, in addition to tendril attacks, made progressing forward next to impossible. It was only after Noxs distraction that the opportunity opened to him, and naturally he took advantage.

Three series of slashes sliced through the waist of the gremlin from three different sides. Normally, the creature would close up the wound, merely decreasing in size. In this instance, Dallions feeling proved to be correct. The number of attacks combined with their intensity made it impossible for the wounds to heal. Within seconds the cuts met, effectively severing the top half of the creature from the bottom.

A chorus of roars and screams filled the air. Losing its intensity, the gremlin burst into hundreds of smaller ones that went falling to the ground like confused droplets of rain.

Guard me! Dallion shouted, as he played a chord on his harpsisword once more.

It took less than a moment for him to sync with the many enemies around him. All that was important now was for him not to be interrupted while performing his music attack. The nearby gremlins sensed that, but it was already too late they could not reach him while falling, and Gloria had already switched to ranged attacks, killing off any who were remotely close to Dallion.

A song of surrender, Dallion sang while playing.

It was tempting to say that the lyrics of the song werent his best work, but then again, he had never composed a song before, so that wasnt strictly true. The sound, on the other hand, were potent as ever, hitting the creatures like a hammer. The destruction of their merged form, combined with Dallions determination, rang to their core, replacing whatever emotions they had with petrifying fear. The vast majority didnt even bother to fight, dropping on the ground like sacks of potatoes.

Dallion didnt let his guard down, adding even darker notes to his music.

Whether or not the cracks had any intention of doing so remained irrelevant. Within seconds Veil went on his usual rampage, slicing through the clusters of motionless enemies like snow. Gloria

initially held back, but seeing that there was no danger to Dallion, joined in as well. Even Nox started having his fun, clawing up a gremlin here and there.

Within minutes it was all over and Dallion felt exhausted.

Thanks, Harp, he muttered as he stopped playing. This was the first time he had felt drained to this level in quite a while. Clumped on the ground, he remained still, trying to catch his breath. Are you alright?

A melody in his awakening realm stated that she was. Even so, Dallion continued to feel bad for hurting her.

Thank you too, shield. Dallion tapped on the armadil shield. Well have a chat again once Im back in the real world.

Dallion? Gloria approached him. Weve left you the last kill.

Oh? Dallion looked up with a weak smile. Sure.

The last kill. Back in games, back home, the last hit meant everything when it came to rewards. From what he had seen here so far, a team win was a team win. More likely it was an honor thing?

Sure. Dallion stood up. Either way, he wasnt missing the opportunity to find out.

The sole surviving gremlin was a short distance away, struggling in Veils grip. With the song of surrender ended, it had regained its viciousness, struggling to break free, though to no avail.

Hurry up, Veil grumbled. This is uncomfortable.

Realm fully mended!

The STONE GARDEN is now flawless!

A sense of achievement filled Dallion. There was something about achieving a hundred percent that made his heart sing.

AREA MENDER

+2 MIND

Mending a major area is never a small feat. Remember to always be prepared. Some areas are more dangerous than others.

SPEEDMEND

+5 REACTION

It takes a certain type of recklessness to erase this many cracks in less than an hour. Nice join, just be careful not to make it your last.

Two achievements, including a fiver? This was definitely a welcome surprise. It was almost funny how Reaction always seemed to get bumped up, regardless of Dallions intentions. Personally, he would have preferred mind, perception, or the unknown stat, but he had no intention of complaining.

Two of them? And a five? Veil grumbled, annoyed. Some people get all the luck!

Its not like they would have been useful for you, idiot! Gloria hissed.

That was all well and fine, but the way Dallion saw it, there were three achievements, not two. A third rectangle was also there, only this time its color was black with a single line of text.

NOX IS LEVEL 2

Thanks.

That wasnt much of an explanation, but what Dallion was more annoyed with was not knowing what a level two crackling was supposed to mean. Had Nox just become more powerful, or had he learned new abilities as well?

How did you get that firebird? Veil asked. Any chance you can lend him to me for a while?

Familiars dont work that way, Dallion smiled. And to be honest, Im not sure. I guess I offered him to surrender, and he did.

Surrender, eh? Veil made a serious face as if this was a groundbreaking concept. For him, maybe it was. Maybe I should try that.

You never know. Dallion laughed. How about we get out of here? Lets have something to eat. My treat. Then he glanced cautiously at Gloria. Then, we can continue exploring the city.

At the end of the day, sacrifices had to be made.

Chapter 184: The Sword Expedition

The feast was definitely on the pricey side. Considering the gifts Dallion had received, as well as the help in completing the area job, he was more than happy to pay. The experience, though. Got him thinking.

It was said that according to awakened etiquette it was rude to enter a realm during conversations. Dallion knew from firsthand experience how awkward that made things, and at the same time, he wanted to check on the harpsisword guardian. So, after a round of chatting, and once he had consumed enough food to relieve part of his fatigue, he did what he had to do.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

I knew you would try this. Nil was waiting for him in the awakening room. Judging by his body language, he didnt fully approve of the visit. It may seem harsh, but I would recommend against attachments with your items, the echo said. That includes myself and the library as well.

Dallion rolled his eyes. This was a conversation he didnt need right now.

There is a thin line between care and obsession. Your objects shouldnt be toys for you to play with, but they shouldnt own you either. Item injuries happen, just as normal injuries do.

Are you telling me to ignore it?

In crude terms, yes.

The answer came as a surprise. Dallion didnt expect the echo to be so blunt about it.

Mistakes were made. Learn from them, try to make sure they dont happen again, and then move on. Everything else will hurt both you and the guardian youre obsessing over.

Worrying when someone is hurt isnt an obsession, Dallion said as he walked past the echo. And its not your concern.

It shouldnt be yours, either. At some point youll have dozens of items linked to your realm. Would you worry about all of them the same way?

Dallion didnt listen. The old echo undoubtedly knew a lot of things, but it seemed real life wasnt one of them. Maybe that was the result of age, and maybe in thirty years Dallion would become the same, but for the moment he cared and wanted to continue to do so.

Making his way through the corridors, Dallion entered the nymphs area. As usual, she was playing her harp on the top of her tower. There was not even the slightest hint of sadness in her melody, though that didnt make Dallion feel much better. Without a word, he climbed up the staircase to reach her.

Hey, Dallion whispered, so as not to disrupt her playing.

On second thought, it would have been better if he had stood silently and wait for her to finish. A few seconds later, she did. As the guardian moved her fingers away from the harp, the strings disappeared, becoming drops of water that flowed down the instrument into a small golden bowl beneath it.

Nice tune, Dallion said.

The nymph looked at him with a warm smile, her expression saying Im fine.

I should have been more careful. I didnt think that cracks could affect you as well which is stupid, since cracks are the embodiment of wear and tear, he started rambling. The thing is, I messed up and I wanted to make sure youre alright.

Im battle gear. The water in the bowl vibrated, creating words. That was her explanation for a lot of things. What you see and what I do are different things.

Suddenly, a blue flame poofed into existence, perching itself on the nymphs shoulder. The firebird chick had clearly become familiar with the awakened realm, and also was expressing a preference towards the nymph compared to Dallion himself.

I guess youre right.

Dallion turned around, looking towards the sea. The usually calming sunset didnt have any effect. For some reason he worried a lot about her in a way she reminded him of his motherhis local mother. Thinking back, it was rushed for him to venture out so soon after defeating Aspion. He

could well have remained a few more months and helped with the leveling up of the village, however, the drive for adventure didnt let him. No, it was more than a drive, it was a deep desire to find out more of this world and its link to Earth. Leveling up was supposed to be the means, yet somewhere on the way it had become the goal.

Vulnerability, the nymph said using the vibration of the water. Each time you come across something new that makes you feel vulnerable you react. Its normal. Youre a musician, after all.

A musician Dallion let out a dry laugh. She wasnt wrong about the vulnerability aspect, though. Its because Im reckless, isnt it?

Everything you gain has its advantages and perils. Until you venture further into your realm and defeat these fears, they will remain lurking there, appearing when the occasion arises.

So, that was the downside. The warnings the achievements came with werent just flavor text to make them sound mysteriousthey were illustrating the consequences. Each achievement came with its own baggage; the more Dallion amassed, the more he had to deal with. On a subconscious level, he probably knew that because he had avoided venturing in his realm after that one time, despite desperately wanting to level up. There would always be a reason or excuse for him to delay. Quite possibly that was part of the challengein wasnt just about defeating the echo guardian, it was about finding the courage and desire to do so as well.

Thanks, Harp. He turned towards her. You always help me out.

The harpsisword guardian smiled.

I have a name, you know, she said through the bowl. Youre free to use it.

One moment later, he was back at the table with Veil and Gloria, enjoying an overpriced meal. No one had caught on that he had been gone for about ten minutes.

So, when are you going through the second trial? he asked.

Tomorrow, the day after. Veil shrugged. Sometime this week probably.

We can get enough money from the guild to do it now, Dallion went on. Ive no idea how much this job is worth, but its not cheap. And if its not enough, Ill pay for the difference so

Thank you, Dallion, Gloria cut him short in a manner suggesting she didnt want any help. Although they considered each other friends, the Luors werent the type of people that would appreciate handouts. Well get there on our own. Meanwhile, youre been very quiet about the things youve been doing here. I had to learn more from Hannah, since you wouldnt share a word.

Dallion felt a ball of ice form in his stomach.

Oh? he did his best to keep a calm appearance. What has she been saying?

A few things. That you got in some serious trouble, for one. There was a momentary pause. This wasn't a direction Dallion expected the conversation to go. Mugged in broad daylight? Making deals with sketchy characters for gear

Sketchy characters? Given that it was coming from Hannah, Dallion wasn't sure if Gloria was referring to the general or Eury. Both fit the bill, and to some degree, Dallion would have preferred if the Luors didn't find out about either of them.

, he stressed. I still say we go to the guild after finishing here. Even if you don't have the test today, you could use a few coins the way you're spending.

Nah, you take care of that. Veil waved a hand, completely disinterested. We'll go exploring on our own. No need to drag you along like a limp puppy.

But Gloria began. Clearly, she had other plans.

Give the guy some space. Veil sighed. You're not lovesick, right?

The comment was meant to be casual, but did manage to get her slightly flustered. That pretty much put an end to the conversation. Everyone finished their food, occasionally resorting to casual small talk, Dallion paid the bill, then all went their separate ways. Veil and Gloria were set on visiting a few of the city guard forts for what reason Dallion could not imagine while he set off to the Icepicker guildhall with the promise to try and get their pay. There was no point in telling them that things didn't work that way. No one was allowed to gate someone else's money, just like that. If they couldn't claim it themselves, it'll just remain at the guild to be collected later.

Yeah, we get along. Dallion had to agree.

It's more than getting along. They trust you a hell of a lot more. You just don't know it yet.

But you do and just don't want to tell me? While it was nice that the shield was acting more like its former self, it still managed to find a way to annoy Dallion with a sentence or two.

And just for your info, I'm not lending you to either of them.

That's a shame. And here I thought I'd be perfect for either of them. Oh well, there's no such thing as perfect happiness, I guess.

That's not even a You know what, never mind.

Yep, things were back to normal. No doubt about it.

It was midmorning by the time Dallion reached the guild hall. This time, in addition to the usual greetings, Dallion got bombarded with questions about the Luor. Those who hadn't seen them were curious about them, and those that had wanted to know when they were coming back. Initially, Dallion started responding, but Nil quickly told him that the best policy in such a situation was to blindly ignore everyone and get to his business.

Estezol was there, as usual, going through guild reports. According to the brief conversation Dallion had had with his echo, the day was mostly reserved for admin work with few actual jobs, which

made it perfect to pass by and claim his pay. Another thing that became clear was that the guild ring didnt merely act as a sort of pager and adviser it was also a guaranteed way to prove whether a job had been done or not.

Hello, Dal, the short man greeted. I cant give you any jobs before you finish the one you have.

Thats alright. Dallion crossed his arms confidently. Because Ive actually done that.

The comment made Estezol pause, look up, crack a smile, thinking that Dallion was pulling his leg, then realizing that Dallion wasnt raised both eyebrows in utter astonishment.

You cleaned up the entire garden?!

Check. Dallion extended his ring hand forward.

Without hesitation, Estezol put his finger on the ring, then moved it away again.

Quite the account. The neared man nodded a few times. And just the three of you. Do you mind if I take the ring for a moment?

Sure, Dallion replied.

However, doing so ended up being easier said than done. Getting the metal band off Dallions finger proved more cumbersome than some of the battles he had done through. After trying for a few seconds, Estezol took out a vial of olive oil to assist. Apparently, Dallion wasnt the first person this had happened to, nor would he be the last. A minute later, his efforts were rewarded and he handed a very oily ring to Estezol. In return the short bearded man gave him a piece of cloth to clean his hands, then disappeared elsewhere in the guildhall.

Very funny, Dallion grumbled. Youre in a good mood today. What happened?

Oh, I was just touched you were so worried about me. Not to worry, though, Im perfectly fine and healthy as youll find out when you visit. That is, if you still intend to keep your promise.

That was a low blow, but there was no getting around it. Dallion had said that in a moment of concern during the battle, and he knew better not to keep his word.

Dal! Estezol shouted from the staircase. Come up here for a moment, please?

Sure. Dallion placed the oily cloth on the counter, far away from any paper, and rushed up.

Estezol lead on to the fourth floor, after which he continued further till. At that point Dallion felt a sense of unease and excitement. From what he knew, the guild master and his assistants occupied the top floor, along with the occasional captain. Going there was the equivalent of being called to see the boss of the company.

In many aspects, the floor was no different from the rest. A T-shaped corridor led along wooden walls of doors. Judging by the size, Dallion would expect that each room was about a hundred square feet or less.

Estezol took to the end of the corridor, knocked on one of the identical wooden doors, then opened it for Dallion to go in. Not knowing what to expect, Dallion stepped right in, only to have the door close behind him without warning.

Morning, Dal. March said from across the room. Its time we had our second chat.

The casual clothes she was wearing made her no less intimidating. Standing by the single window of the room, the woman held Dallions guild ring, moving it between her fingers as if she were about to perform a magic trick.

Dallion swallowed. Looking at things objectively there were two conclusions he could come to: the captain had something important to say, and this wasnt the captains room it lacked any furniture or decorations. In fact, the only item in the entire room was an old, massive sword hanging down from the ceiling. The weapon itself was made of a metallic-green material Dallion hadnt seen before. About a third of the blade was flawless, shining with a pleasant green gleam. the guard and hilt, on the other hand, were heavily corroded with patches of rust.

I saw that youve cleaned your first area, March said. Good initiative, although you still need some work on the execution side.

Ill get there, Dallion replied. Im learning from my mistakes.

I know, and you have a lot more mistakes to make until youre ready. She tossed Dallion his ring back. What do you think this is?

A sphere item? Dallion knew this was a trick question, he just didnt know what the trick was.

Its a world item, March clarified. Similar to a sphere item, but different, and much, much larger. Youve seen complex sphere items. You know how large they could be. This is beyond that. Each level is a world in itself, but also isnt.

Dallion blinked.

Each level is a realm the size of a city, and just as intricate. Each realm has a gate that leads to the next. The guardian only appears when certain conditions are met. However, once you defeat the guardian, it doesnt go away. It only lets you pass further. Weve explored less than a dozen levels, but one thing became clear from the beginning these levels were inhabited.

A whole world in a sword, Dallion whispered

A very dead world, from what we have determined. Weve come across lots of ruins, but no inhabitants. The captain took a step closer to the sword, her hand reaching out, but stopping an inch from the metal surface. There arent many of these items out there. The truth is that no one is sure what they are exactly. This one was lent to us by the Magic Academy. Since they failed to explore it, they agreed to part with it for a price.

Just like that? Dallion couldnt stop himself from asking. Fortunately for him, a smile appeared on the womans face.

The guild master has his ways. Needless to say that this has been the guilds major investment and as such the faster we finish exploring the item, the better. That is where you come in.

Me? Dallion felt pressure as if an anvil was placed on his shoulders.

I want you to gain enough area experience and when you do join the expedition to explore the sword to the hilt.

Dallion swallowed. This wasnt something he had expected.

Chapter 185: Hidden Fears

World items logically, it was almost a given they had to exist. With items being realms, and areas of their own vast domains, it was inevitable that there would be an item that would encompass an entire world. Now that he knew for certain, though, Dallion's mind was on the verge of exploding with questions.

What if the world he was currently in was nothing but an item itself? For all he knew he could still be back on Earth, while his real body was in an awakened pen or can of beer. Although this world seemed too nice for a can of beer. But, if true, what did that make the people of this world? Were they cracks? Were they blocker creatures? Did they even exist in the strict sense of the word?

The responses were pretty much as he expected. Nox and Harp were all for it, Nil was cautious, suggesting upping his skills a bit more, and Lux had no idea what the question really meant.

One thing was certain, though. If Dallion seriously wanted to improve, he was going to have to resort to additional training, which meant getting some actual mentorship from Vend. How that the secret was out and Dallion knew what the end goal was, it would hopefully be easier.

As Vend's apprentice Dallion could see that, he could also see him joining in the expedition and worm himself close to March. The endgame wasn't the guild, though. More likely it was the item itself.

What do you think is hidden in the world item?

Dear boy, a better question would be what isn't. It's a world item, emphasis on world. Forgotten knowledge, obscure skills, maybe even an entire species sealed away. Anything is possible. That is precisely why the Academy shouldn't have sold it off. The idiots always enjoyed playing with

power they dont understand, but selling that power at random is a new low even for them. Sometimes I think its a miracle the Imperial house doesnt wipe them off the map. Or the Order.

Good to know.

The conversation had taken a dark turn all of a sudden. Clearly Adzorg had a very poor opinion of the Imperial family, the Order and the Seven Moons, and the Magic Academy. No wonder he spent all his time gambling in the basement of a small guild. In a way, Dallion almost pitied him.

Veil and Gloria were at the inn by the time he arrived. Apparently, they had run out of funds before reaching their first City Fort, making them return to the inn in hopes of getting more. When Dallion explained that only they could claim the money from the job, their expressions had soured faster than milk in the desert. Dallion had offered to loan them a few gold coins eachmost of his payso they could continue their spree, but as before they had flat out refused. It was then agreed they would all go back to the guildhall after their lunch shift was over.

About half an hour later, the crowds of customers started to pour in. Word of the Luors exploits had reached quite a lot of peopleshowing in practical terms the importance of advertising. The siblings exotic and very identifiable appearance combined with their desire to roam through as much as Nerosal as possible had made lots of people decide to pass by the Gremlins Timepiece. The customers were so many that Hannah had to rent chairs and tables from a few other inn owners she knew and place them outside. In part because of that, Dallion was also forced on the outside, where he was to play and sing so as to attract customers while Veil and Gloria were to take turns serving and mending in and outside.

Given the number of people, Dallion suggested that Hannah hire more temp waiters, but the idea was quickly shot down. There was only so much Aspan could prepare at a given amount of time, and having more than a few waiters would place the burden entirely on him. When Dallion suggested Hannah hire another temp cook, she grumbled at him to get on with his work and leave the planning to her.

Lunch lasted two hours longer than expected. When the last scraps of non-reserved food were gone, Hannah announced that the inn wasnt serving anymore. Judging by the calm reaction of the customers, the practice didnt seem unusual.

The borrowed chairs and tables were quickly returned, the inside of the inn was given a quick clean, and then the private staff feast took place. This time, though, there was slightly less food, though more money to go around.

Know any good places for iron? Gloria asked Hannah while eating. Weve got lots of wood and stone back home, but metals are a problem.

Iron. The innkeeper hummed. Best talk to the merchant guilds. They can help out, but haggling is all up to you. If you want to buy a small number of ingots, any blacksmith will help you out, though their prices are high.

Do you think anyone will agree to a supply deal for a level three village?

No. Hannah didnt mince words. Youre not close and too small for the effort.

Yes, I think youre right. Gloria sighed. By the sound of it the village was still going through some growing pains.

Your best bet is just to buy the materials for now. You'll pay more, but you'll get what you need in the short term. Build up, get more people, and the merchant guilds will come to you. The important thing is not to rush it.

The advice was sound. However, Dallion suspected it was going to be completely ignored. Knowing Gloria she wasn't one to wait, and neither was Veil.

Jiroh might be able to help you out, Hannah said, making Dallion almost choke on his food. She's a hunter so has a few connections.

A hunter? Both Veil and Gloria leaned forward like teens hearing about a pop-idol.

She usually serves tables here, when she's not taking her time doing stuff outside, Hannah grumbled. She's supposed to be back in a few weeks, so you'll get to meet her before the festival. She helped Dal here get into the Icepicker guild.

She introduced me to them, Dallion clarified.

And also got his gear back from when he was mugged.

Dallion remained silent. There was no going around this one. Jiroh was the one who had organized and made it all happen. Knowing that she'd be back in a few weeks was definitely a relief, double so since it meant Eury would be back as well. Even with all the chaos surrounding Dallion's life, he missed her a lot, although that also meant he had to figure out what to do with the Luors until then. A few weeks weren't a lot of time, but enough for him not to worry for a while.

I'll be right back. Dallion stood up.

And where are you going? Hannah crossed her arms. I'm not saving food for later.

That's fine. You guys enjoy it. There's something I need to do before we go to the guild.

Without further explanations, Dallion went up to his room. Gloria and Hannah continued their conversation on trade and goods prices, occasionally interrupted by Veil whose only comments were how cheap or expensive something was in the city. From what Dallion remembered, everything was far cheaper in Dherma. Thinking back to the time of the chainling hunt, getting a silver coin seemed like an incredible prize. Looking at it now, Kalis was using his pocket money to get their interest. Being a double digit himself, the soldier probably earned far more than Dallion did now.

It's a one time thing, Nil. I have something to prove to myself.

Maybe you're right. But I'm still doing this.

Shield, okay if we take a raincheck? Dallion asked as he entered his room.

I figured this might happen. Don't worry about it. I'm always here and waiting.

Thanks. Dallion took hold of the harpsisword in one hand and the Nox dagger in the other.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The first thing Dallion saw in the awakening room was Nox. The crackling was calmly sitting in the center of the room, eager to follow Dallion further in his mind. Looking at him, Dallion could see no change from the time he was a level one familiar.

Ready to set off, Nox? Dallion bent down and scratched the crackling behind the ear. The familiar seemed to appreciate the effort. I hope youve learned some new tricks because well need them.

No sooner had Dallion said that than Lux popped up in the room. The firebirds method of transportation was definitely unique, although no longer startling.

Yes, you too, Lux, Dallion laughed, causing Nox to narrow his eyes. Youll be my healing torch.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion entered the corridor. It had been a while since hed gone to his personal arena. The place no doubt had changed after his many level ups. Satisfying his curiosity, though, was going to have to wait.

Dallion made his way to the spot the crossroads had been. This was the spot at which, after some haggling, he had obtained his forging skills. One of the paths led to the paradox cube, which now had transformed into a large empty cube shaped room. At some point he was going to have to start using it for something, though for the moment, Dallion turned into the other direction, where a closed door awaited.

Here we go. Dallion summoned his harpsisword and went inside.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your destiny.

As before, a corridor extended forward, continuing into the darkness. This time, though, there was a faint smell in the air, like old meat mixed with sugar.

So, good smells indicate good things, and bad spells indicate bad things?

Sometimes, other times, not so much.

Thanks for nothing.

The further Dallion went, the stronger the smell became. There was no doubt about itthe smell was definitely of rotting meat, although he still couldnt place the note of sweetness. It wasnt sugar water, and it definitely wasnt honey rather it was some sort of perfume or flower fragrance that he hadnt encountered before.

Anything to worry about, Nox? Dallion asked, focusing on his music skills.

The crackling didnt reply, continuing forward, ears flat to its head. It too could feel something ominous ahead, although it wasnt certain what exactly.

For minutes, the corridor continued. The smell became a stench, forcing Dallion to cover his mouth and nose with his elbow pit. In the future, it wouldnt be a bad idea to ask Eury to make him a scarf he could use in situations such as these.

Faint reddish-orange light emerged in the distance. The first thought that went through Dallions mind was to brace himself in case that was an approaching train. After another five minutes, it turned out that it wasnt although Dallion wished it had been. Stretching in front of him for as far as the eye could see was a battlefield. Piles of bodies in various stages of decay covered the ground among the remnants of buildings.

There was no answer.

Nil?

Nil wont help you here, a familiar voice said.

Several miles forward, sitting on the remnants of a massive stone arch, were three figures. Even from this distance, Dallion could identify them clearly. Two belonged to Aspion and his sister, as Dallion had seen them in the village chiefs memories. As for the third one it was Dallions grandfather.

Chapter 186: The Ancient Trio

Seeing his grandfather on the battlefield froze Dallion to the core. This was the last person he expected to see. The former Village chief, he could understand, but his grandfather that was something he wasnt prepared for.

I see youre doing well for yourself, the echo of Dallions grandfather said. In a guild and double digits. A bit disappointed you havent figured out forging yet. It took me less than a week.

Hes only following in your footsteps, Kraisten, Aspion said with mild amusement. As they say, those who cant lead can only follow.

Hes got music the third figure said. She was less amused than the other echoes. Dallion could see her entire being vibrating with feelings of vengeance and betrayal.

That doesnt matter, Kraisten smiled. Pride emanated from him like a lighthouse. He cant use it. Not against his old man.

Want to take him on your own? Aspion asked, scratching his left ear.

Would you like that, Dal? Kraisten shouted. Want to have a one-on-one with me? Who knows, if you win, maybe the rest of us will just give up.

Laughter filled the battlefield, making the stench even stronger. Dallion remained silent. Deep down he knew what he was facingthe fear that his grandfather had been a monster responsible for thousands of deaths. Even worse, the fear that his grandfather had enjoyed it. If Aspions memories were to be believed, he was the one who resorted to creating a chainling on the battlefield. If he had

gone that far, what had he done before? And if he had no regard for human life, was Dallion in danger of becoming the same?

Why are you hesitating? his grandfather asked. Arent there goals you want to achieve? Being invited to a captains party is a pretty important gig. From there you can pretty much join any provincial army, and Im not talking about the city guard losers the real army that goes about the wilderness dealing with important stuff.

Silence.

Or maybe youre considering joining the private sector? Kraisten asked, getting a chuckle from Aspion. Pay is worse, but the hours are better. Everyone likes a hunter. Good, bad, criminals, nobles all of them will be happy to request for your services. Some may even invite you to a few social occasions. And lets not forget, that way youll be closer to your gorgon.

The word pierced Dallion like an arrow. His first impulse was to wonder how they knew about Eury. It took him a while to realize the obvious they were part of him, so they knew everything he did. Possibly his current thoughts as well.

I still think my granddaughters a better match, Aspion said. If it wasnt for her, youd have been sealed out by now. Its obvious she likes you. Just like my sister liked your grandfather. Fate is in the blood.

Kraisten looked over his shoulder. The woman next to him didnt react. If there had been a spark between them, it was now gone. Could the same happen to Dallion? If he continued along his current path, would Gloria resent him?

Hes undecided, Kierra noted. About everything.

Of course he is. A menacing smile appeared on Kraistens face. We wouldnt be here if he wasnt. And if his echo was here, hed say the same thing. Well, grandson, I have bad news for you. This is where youll stay.

COMBAT INITIATED

The fight started in an instant. Faster than the eye could see, Kraisten summoned a pair of weapons and tossed them to Aspion and Kierra, who in turn darted towards Dallion. Their speed was substantial, letting them half the distance to Dallion before he realized what was going on.

Shield! Dallion went into a defensive stance. There was no time for him to resort to music, not against opponents as skilled as this.

He was supposed to be the one to take the initiative. His music skills would have been the first blow, granting him an immediate advantage. He didnt even need to play the harpsisword, he could have added some feelings of fear in defeat in his words while talking to them. If he hadnt been taken aback by the way the echoes looked, he would have done just that. Now that opportunity was gone.

In his mind, Dallion split into four instances. Three of them charged forward, while one remained in its current defensive position. As they approached their enemies, though, things changed drastically.

Aspion burst into half a dozen copies of himself. Thanks to Dallions music skills, it was apparent which ones were clones, but that didnt help one bit. Three of them easily overpowered Dallions mental splits, slicing them to bits through a series of combined attacks. Meanwhile, the instance that attacked Kierra had its head pierced in a single blow.

With all of his attack instances defeated, Dallion chose to remain where he was.

Good job splitting, Aspion said while three of his echoes rushed onwards towards Dallion. Echoes are so much more efficient, though.

By the looks of it, that much was true. However, echoes had one considerable weaknessit only took one hit to destroy them. Retreating back, Dallion summoned his dartbow and fired as many shots as time would allow. Evading at this distance proved difficult, causing two of them to disappear. Seconds later the third one was gone as well, leaving only Nox in its place.

Good one, Nox

, Dallion thought. This had been a rather close call, and the battle had only started.

Bracing himself for more echoes, Dallion split another two instances of himself, this time directing them directly at Kierra. To his surprise, the number of Aspions didnt change. It seemed that there was a limit to how many echoes one could create. After this was over, Dallion was going to have to look into the matter. As much as he disliked it, creating echoes was becoming vital not only in awakened life, but in combat as well.

While Nox took out another of Aspions echoes, three mental splits of Dallion attacked Kiera in a different fashion. Ranged attacks proved useless, as did a direct blade contest. Pushing against her with an extended shield, though, seemed to have a considerable effect. Naturally, Dallion picked that version and continued on.

MEDIUM WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 10%

What the?! How did that happen?

Dallion stared at the rectangle, then looked down. For a split second, he saw a dagger sticking out of his left leg. With all the adrenaline pumping through his veins, he hadnt even felt the wound. The weapon quickly vanished, reappearing back in Kierras hand.

Green markers appeared around Dallion for the first time since the start of the battle. After everything so far, this was the moment they finally caught up to the speed of fight.

You wont go far with guard skills, Dallions grandfather shouted from his spot on the stone arch. In real battle they only slow you down. Veil had the right idea. As long as you attack well enough theres no need for defense.

No sooner had he thought that than Aspion attacked from the side. The blond was much faster than what Dallion had experienced in their Dherma battle, but then again, so was Dallion. With a twist and turn, he avoided the tip of the enemys blade, then continued his movement around Kierra, all the time holding the extended armadil shield between them. Moments later, time slowed down.

Normally that would mark the turning point in Dallions fight, but here it didnt. Just as he had used his guard skills to gain an advantage, so did Kierra.

Both had followed the same technique, and both had gained its advantages as a result. The only person partially slower was Aspion.

Harp!

Dallion summoned his weapon and made a vertical slice. Kierra on her part parried with a horizontal one. The sword she was using was far smaller in size, but just as sturdy. Looking at it with his forging and music skills, Dallion wasnt able to see any significant flaws in the blade.

The attack continued for a full second, during which over a dozen strikes were exchanged. Seeing that neither could gain the upper hand, both sides leaped back.

MINOR HEAL

Your health has increased by 5%

Dallion gritted his teeth. During a battle of such intensity, even the healing was of limited use. What was worse, there was no time for him to get a break. The instant he broke awake from one enemy, the other would attack with just as much ferocity. The only positive was that Nox had started tackling the last of the echoes, making the fight two to one in the enemies favor.

Youre relying on guardians, Dallions grandfather notes. Good move. A lot of people will criticize you that its not something a true awakened should do. Thats a load of crap. Theres only one truth on the battlefielduse any advantage you have. If you dont, why are you even here?

Is that what you did? Dallion shouted, pulling back again. Using the dartbow, he shot a bolt at Aspion, though the attack was easily deflected by a sword strike. Is that why you created a chainling to fight for you?

It won the battle, didnt it? The echo laughed. And you agree with my decision, dont you? Thats what has you so scaredthat Im a monster and youll end up becoming a monster like me. That is why youve been avoiding making echoes, thats why youre hesitant to use your music skills. If I had that skill during the war, Id have used it every chance I got. And not only on enemy troops, but on mine as well. If I could remove the fear and pain that my side felt, everyone would have been better off. Well he laughed everyone apart from the enemies.

You know what the funny thing is? Kraisten asked, as Dallion blocked Kierras attack with his shield. Despite everything you say, youre already on the path to become me. In fact, youre more than halfway there.

Dallion didnt reply, summing his harpsisword again and doing a series of circular slashes to push his attackers back.

You've already found yourself a crackling familiar and used him in battle. You're even using him to fight against us now.

That's different! Dallion shouted.

Is it? Cracks are abominations too. They are the embodiment of ruin and decay that cause items to break. Just look at Nox, those lovely claws of his already have the power to kill minor item guardians. Did you think of that when you destroyed a stone or button? When you used him to defeat sphere item guardians, did you consider the effects he would have on them? You saw how your harpsisword reacted when a crack affected her blade. Is Nox all that different?

And that's precisely my point. There are no monsters in this world. It's all about what we do with them. Was your crackling a monster when he helped unseal the awakened powers of your mother? No. It's the same with chainlings. I used one to end a war that would have continued to rage for years. Is that wrong?

Was it? Dallion no longer was certain. Maybe he was just like his grandfather, but refused to accept it. Deep down, that had been his fear all along, and now that he was facing it, he didn't know how to act. There were things as good and evil in this world. The Star was a perfect example of it. But were the guardians? Or the cracklings? After all, they were merely true to their nature. After all, if it took bending the rules a little to do something good, wasn't it

Chapter 187: Army of Fear

All of Dallion's doubt vanished like fog at dawn. The voice was absolutely correct giving in to his fears wasn't the way he'd win this battle. Dallion was not a monster and had no intention of becoming one. As long as he knew where the line was and didn't cross it, history wasn't going to repeat itself.

A sword swished at the height of Dallion's neck. Even without markers, avoiding it was elementary and immediately followed by a counterattack.

Lux, blind him, Dallion whispered.

The firebird flashed an incandescent blue. Caught off guard, Aspion tried to jump back, but it was already too late. His harpsisword pierces his chest.

CRITICAL STRIKE!

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

Any other time Dallion would have been pleased with such a result. Fighting against a humanoid echo, though, he felt cheated. Such an attack was supposed to kill it off, or at the very least incapacitate it to the point he would have to deal with one opponent less. Instead, there seemed to be no apparent difference. What was worse, the attack revealed an opening for Kiera to take advantage of. Even with the armadil shield extended, Dallion wasn't able to get away unscathed.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

Immediately Dallion split into three instances, aiming to finish off Aspion. In two versions his attacks were deflected, but in the third he did a clean strike through the enemys waist. Not the most elegant attack, but it was something. Dallion chose that instance. Before his blade could reach its target, though, a surprising force came out of nowhere, pushing him back a dozen steps through dirt and corpses. Moments later, Dallion saw that a new figure had joined the enemy team.

Anything you can do I can do better, the version of his grandfather said, standing in front of Aspion. All this time you knew Id be the strongest of the three. What did you think? That itll get easier when you defeat them? Or did you think that I would let you?

Beside him, Aspion smirked. During Dallions life in Dherma he had seen the two as nothing but enemies, but there had been a time they were close friends, as close as Dallion now was with Gloria and Veil. Of course, his grandfather would do anything in his power to protect his friends, and this challenge illustrated that. Fighting two of them was difficult enough, but now that Dallion was facing all three, things had become impossible Unless that was the point of the trial.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion considered things logically. When it came down to it, this was just a level up triala room in his realm that illustrated a deep fear to be overcome. Similar to the other awakening trials, there was a way he could win.

Combining his music and forging skills, Dallion examined the gear of his enemies yet again. If there were major flaws, he definitely couldnt see them. His grandfather had done a pretty good job constructing the items. Getting a chance to break them was looking highly unlikely.

Why were there three enemies, though? Back in the puzzle cube, the enemy had been just one. True, there were a lot of other crack-like creatures that kept him from reaching that point, but it wasnt like numbers were of significant importance.

Whats the matter? Aspion asked. Thinking of asking us to surrender?

So far that hadnt crossed Dallions mind. It was clear that they wouldnt accept, although the question gave him an idea.

Well, its only strange the first time.

A blink of the eye later, a second Dallion was standing beside him on the battlefield his first echo, or rather the first echo he had created. Looking at it felt marginally less weird than he had thought it would. It was almost like looking at a picture of himself come to life.

The echo nodded at him, then summoned a copy of Dallions harpsisword.

Neither Dallion nor his echo charged forward. That wasnt their plan. Possibly for the very same reason, Kraisten and his two companions dashed forward. They too had figured out what his plan was and were determined to stop it.

Nox! Dallion shouted as he let go of his harpsisword and summoned the Nox dagger instead. Behind him, his echo had already played the first chord of a melody. Now the only thing left was for both Dallions to start singing.

Sounds of weird filled the air, synching with Kraisten, Aspion, and Kierra. This was the first time that Dallion had used this power of music, but it seemed to have the desired effect. Slower than before, his enemies went for the echo in an attempt to end the playing, but Dallion intervened. Combat splitting again, he used his focus entirely on his guard skills to shield his music source from all attacks.

On the surface it seemed as if the attacks had intensified, but that wasnt exactly true. The enemies were no longer attacking from a position of strength, but of weakness, desperate to kill off the echo and all Dallion had to do was prevent them from doing so.

Slashes, blocks, and parries continued in rapid succession. Hindered by the musics effects, the enemies movements were made more predictable, although still requiring Dallion to resort to both the armadil shield and the firebird from reaching his echo. On occasion the echo itself also assisted with a brief block or parry before returning to playing the harp. Unlike Dallion, it didnt seem capable of splitting.

At one point, Aspion changed approach. Foregoing the echo, he targeted Dallion directly with an arc slash. The strike was perfect, combining acrobatics, athletics, and attack skills. From his splitting instances, Dallion saw that in half of the cases the result would be a moderate wound in the right leg. The normal approach was to choose one of the instances in which he wasnt wounded. However, this time this wasnt his intention. Thanks to Lux, sustained injuries were not a concern. Getting in the perfect position for a counterattack, on the other hand, was.

There was a momentary prick of pain as Aspions sword sliced through part of Dallions leg. Taking advantage of the opening, Dallion counterattacked, aiming for the others throat. Similar to before, Dallions grandfather stepped in, protecting his teammate with a shield. This was the moment Dallion was waiting for.

Now, Nox!

Instead of stopping his attack, Dallion went on, slashing across the shield with his dagger. The tip of the blade slid across the metal surface, leaving a thin line. Moments later, half of the shield fell off. Clearly the crackling had powered up considerably after his level boost. Dallion, of course, didnt

stop there. Taking advantage of the momentary confusion, he twirled around, performing a second attack that targeted Aspion. Unprotected, the blond attempted to parry, only to have the blade of his sword snapped off a few inches from the hilt.

Back! Kraisten retreated.

Dallion threw the dagger at Aspion and summoned his dartbow. A bolt split the air. From such a distance, evasion was impossible.

FATAL STRIKE!

Damage dealt is increased by 500%

For a split second a smile appeared on Aspions face a genuine smile, not the smirks he had made before. After that the entire echo disappeared in a cloud of red dust.

One down, Dallions echo said, putting an end to the singing. Now is the time you surrender, he voiced Dallions thoughts.

I guess you have some backbone after all, his grandfather said. I was worried you might straight up quit and go crying somewhere. Nice to know that I can be surprised now and again.

Is there any point in going on? Dallion asked. Your advantage is gone. From here on I have the advantage.

So it would seem. Kraisten gave Kierra a nod. Tell me one thing. What do you expect to find here once the fight is over?

Dallion hesitated.

Dont worry, its not a trick or warning. Im just genuinely curious. Lets say that you level up. What are you going to do with a battlefield in your mind?

Clean it up?

And bury the past? Not the best choice.

Thats your past, Dallion said. Or something I think could have been your past.

The truth was that Dallion knew precious little. Events might have gone down just as he imagined, or maybe they had been worse. Either way, it was all speculation based on a few fragments of information he had obtained.

And even if it is. I dont have to see it to remember it.

Thats true. You dont have to see something in order for it to be real. Kraisten moved further back. But I respect your choice. Ill even help you out. He clapped his hands.

The sound echoed throughout the battlefield. Initially nothing happened, then the first signs became visible. It all started with a faint grain of anger in the decaying bodies. Like a seed, the grain grew, turning them from lifeless piles of flesh into living entities hostile evil entities with rusty weapons and armor.

So much for a number advantage and just when Dallion had worked so far to earn it. Still, they were only blockers. The white rectangles above their heads only described them as falling warriors with

no additional information. More than likely they were weak, relying on numbers to take him down. Dallions only concern was whether they would merge or not.

Taking a defensive stance and replacing his dagger with the harpsisword, he waited.

They dont look that tough, his echo said in support. Want to try a duet?

No, better stick to the plan. You play, I'll defend.

Sure. You know you dont have to reply. I know your answer when you think of it.

Its more polite this way, Dallion said, but in his mind, he was also laughing at himself for forgetting the fact.

One of the nearby zombie-soldiers leapt forward in an attack. Technically, they werent exactly zombie soldiers. Along with their return to life, all wounds on their bodies had disappeared, restoring them to their previous state. Only the state of their armor and weapons reminded that they had been dead at some point.

Dallion blocked the attack with his shield, then took a step to the side and performed a double slash at his enemys torso. Based on his experience in the sphere items, in the majority of the cases the blocker creature would die from the first strike, although some would manage to parry the blow. In this case, not only did the soldier block both blows but also engaged in a counterattack of her own.

What the heck? Dallion reacted instantly with a parry, then twirled to the other side of his attacker in an attempt to land a fatal blow. That too was evaded, even if barely. Meanwhile, the rest of the soldiers were keeping their distance, forming a large circle with a ten-foot radius around Dallion and his echo.

Surprised? Dallions grandfather asked. Who said that the fallen ones would be weak? They were brought to life by your fears, after all. And, boy, do you have many fears.

Chapter 188: Chainling Creation

Surrounded by a thousand fears sounded great as a fantasy book or television series. Having to face them in combat, on the other hand, was not so great. Even back-to-back with his echo, and all the advanced gear he had obtained, Dallion was starting to have difficulties. Defeating a single soldier was roughly as difficult as fighting a level ten guardianthey were intelligent, resourceful, and always helped each other. The worst part was that while fighting one, Dallion got a sense of what the fear was, making him even less confident of the outcome.

Similar to a harp, the soldiers very existence was centered around a negative emotion vibrating in their core. And while it took little effort to counter the vibration with Dallions music skill, there was no way he could block thousands.

Just standing there, the echo replied.

That was another thing Dallion had to be mindful of. His grandfather remained the focus of the challenge and could swoop in at any moment if he was presented an opening.

The fight also made it clear to Dallion why so many people chose not to pass through the gate of awakening. Not only was leveling up much more difficult than before, but it also forced people to

face the things they had spent a lifetime avoiding. It was so tempting to call it a day and surrender. He had killed one of the three main opponents, after all, so with a bit of practice there was every chance that he'd do better next time. However, a voice deep in Dallion's mind told him not to give up.

A hundred and one, the echo said, trying to bring some cheer to the experience.

You know that's only ten percent, Dallion said, out of habit. Or less.

Just trying to look on the bright side.

The bright side. There wasn't anything even remotely bright about this. If the defeated fears dropped some loot or even gave imaginary experience, then there would be a bright side, or at least Dallion would trick his mind into seeing one. As it stood it was one long grueling battle for survival.

Extending his armadil shield to block a double charge, Dallion attempted to do a zig-zag attack. The action was successful, although every single one of the enemy soldiers deflected it.

A hundred and three, the echo shouted a short distance away.

What do you think I'm doing? Dallion hissed out of frustration. He'd never stopped using his attack, guard, and music skills! And as for his level one forging, it had proved to be useless.

His enemies light up like Christmas trees. Every part of their armor and weapons were covered with flaws and outright cracks begging to be exploited.

Absolutely, the echo replied.

In a single instant, the battle turned. It was quite impressive how something so simple and obvious was able to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. It was also infuriating how Dallion had forgotten about it when subjected to stress. If it wasn't for the voice's advice, he would almost certainly have lost this challenge.

You're welcome, the echo shouted back, clearly missing the point.

One after another the soldiers popped out of existence like popcorn kernels. While their skills remained just as impressive as before, even they couldn't guard against attacks that focused on their guard abilities. As their weapons and armor were destroyed, so were their owners' abilities to protect themselves. What used to take tens of seconds or sometimes even half a minute now took less than two. Through a series of piercing attacks, Dallion would first aim at the weak points of an opponent's armor following the aim markers that had appeared then finish them off with one more blow. After a while he combined both in a single attack, piercing through with his Nox dagger and directly eliminating his fear.

While fighting in this fashion, Dallion also got to see a partial result of Nox's level up. The crackling could not only perform line cracks as in the past but also spiderweb ones, which proved very useful when piercing through a piece of armor or even an enemy blade. The sensation was oddly satisfying, like piercing through an eggshell with a dull needle.

In fifteen minutes, a mere hundred of soldiers remained. Dallion's echo was still leading in their competition by a dozen, but the difference was quickly melting away. As the number of enemies decreased, Dallion spent more and more time looking at his grandfather. There were several points during the battle at which it would have been extremely beneficial for Kraisten and Kierra to join in the attack, but for some reason they hadn't. Clearly, they were planning something, but the question was what.

Four eighty-nine, Dallion's echo shouted.

Dallion picked up the pace, doing another zig-zag attack. Thanks to the aim markers and the properties of his Nox dagger, all but one of his targets were killed off this time. The last remaining soldiers paused for a moment, looking at his shield that was only partially there, only to receive a piercing blow through the breastplate and into the chest.

Five hundred and one, Dallion said loudly.

Well done. His grandfather started a slow clap, while Dallion's echo went after the remaining five fears. Who would have thought?

Not you, that's for sure. Dallion said defiantly. Technically, he wouldn't be wrong. If it wasn't for the voice, Dallion wouldn't have made it so far. Any more advice you'd like to give?

Wow. He really is arrogant, isn't he? Kraisten turned to Kierra. He defeated a few of his own fears and things he's king of the world.

Just like you, the woman said with an expressionless face.

That's right. Kraisten grinned at Dallion. Just like me. Or maybe you think you're better?

There was a moment of silence. Dallion didn't dare say a word. For some reason, his grandfather still managed to get under his skin.

You really do think you're better, Kraisten went on. Not that I'm surprised. Arrogance runs in the family. Sadly, it seems that intelligence has skipped a few generations.

So has cowardice, Dallion shouted back. Aspion is gone, and so is your army. What will you do now? Fight me or just sit up there and talk?

Thats a very good question. Kraisten snapped his finger. One thing you would have known about battle forgers, if you had the skills to be one, is that we do our best fighting on the back lines.

A feeling of dread swept through the battlefield, so heavy that for a moment Dallion felt as if he were being pushed into the ground. At the same time there was a sense of allure.

A silhouette of darkness appeared beneath the arch Dallions grandfather was standing on. It then grew, tripling in size until it was as big as an elephant a very fangy elephant with the body of a wolf and dozens of eyes all over its black torso.

Chainling Dallion whispered.

You got so caught up in the moment that you forgot the real fear you were here to face, Kraistain laughed. It never was about me, it was about the things I could do. Using friends to fight my battles, relying on subordinates, even armies Interesting, arent they saying the same about you?

Dallion felt a chill in his stomach.

No need to answer. I already know what you know. Weren't you told several times that you can't rely on others forever? And still you keep doing that. You did so this morning. Vend asked you to clear the area along, but you asked Veil and Gloria to do it for you. Remind me, how did the battle go? The man scratched his chin, pretending to think. You were to play your harpsword, while Veil and Gloria protected you, isn't that right? And didn't you send out a crackling to fight the gremlins as well?

It wasn't like that.

But it was. It was exactly like that. Even when you fought the chainling cub you relied on Falkner and Bel to do most of the work for you.

I saved a person back then.

No, they did. You just helped from the backlines. The only reason you have been engaging in combat at all is because you're too stupid to learn how to forge. When you learn that, you'll stop altogether.

Did you stop fighting when you became a forger? Dallion countered. His mind was already filled with doubt. And with each new thought of uncertainty, the chainling facing him grew larger.

You're convinced I did. In fact, that is part of the reason you can't overcome your forging skills block. A child would be able to do it, but you specifically chose something that would keep you from progressing. You might claim there was some big brain move behind it or that you've been practicing every day to get better, but we both know the truth that you're afraid.

If I was afraid, why would I have asked for the skill!

The grin on Kraistens face widened, making his face look grotesque.

Because for a moment you thought that you were better than me.

Beneath the arch, the chainling roared in laughter.

But think about this, Kraisten went on. If you really were, I wouldn't be here. The fear you'd have to face would be different. You're here because you're still struggling to accept the truth. But I'll help

you. After all, that's why I'm here. The man took a step forward, standing on the very edge of the arch. I'll tell you how to make a chainling of your own.

The words pierced Dallion like a thunderbolt. That was the last thing he wanted! There was nothing good that would come of it. Even if he could create a chainling, it wasn't like he could use it without people finding out, and if they did, the Order of the Seven Moons would get involved.

You're thinking of the consequences, aren't you? Kraisten asked, as if reading Dallion's mind. Oh, there will be many, trust me. Using such power comes with a few risks. When it doesn't work out, you might end up like me, or worse. They won't kill you. They never kill it's more suitable for them to let those they dislike walk around with a curse or two as a reminder of what happens to everyone who gets caught. However, there's a way around it. All you have to do is learn from my mistakes and be better.

No!

That is your choice to make, of course. It's the wrong choice, but ultimately it doesn't matter. A wrong choice here will only cost you a few weeks, after which you'll be back here to try and level up again. I'm just trying to save you some time. You want to get stronger to face the Star, don't you?

That much was true. If Dallion was ever to face the Star he had to get much stronger than he was now. He had to go past the level twenty cap.

You've seen the Star make chainlings at will. If you can't, there's no way you'll defeat him. Fight fire with fire and all that.

There was so much wrong in that, but still there was no harm in Dallion hearing his grandfather out. At the very least, he'd know what not to do. It was always better to have all the information available. That way he wouldn't make a chainling by accident.

It's all very simple, actually. You were definitely much luckier than I was, Kraisten said with a faint note of envy in his voice. You already have a crackling. Chainlings are basically the same thing. The only difference is that they require a sentient entity to flourish. The smarter the entity, the better. You've seen the shelfeys? Disgusting failures which are the result of a guardian attempting to become a chainling.

That explained why they only appeared in sphere items. Those things were so old that the cracklings had become powerful enough to challenge the item guardians, but since there was more than one guardian keeping the item stable, the result had been a level with a brainless abomination instead.

You're saying I have to sacrifice someone.

In the real world, yes, but we're not talking about the real world. In fact, I would recommend against doing so. As you've seen, things tend to get complicated even when there's a good reason for doing so. No, we'll only be dealing with chainlings in the awakened realms. They will be your allies there, and once you're done with them, you can poof them out of existence.

You make it sound too easy.

Because it is. Kraisten crossed his arms. Making a chainling is extremely easy, and you have everything it takes. All you have to do is to infect your echo with your crackling dagger.

Dallion turned towards his echo. There was alarm in all of their eyes.

As long as its just a scratch the echo wont die, Dallions grandfather went on. Think of it as an injection. Instead of making a scar, have the substance slowly pour in. It will be a bit rough to watch the first few dozen times, but youll get used to it.

Staring back at him, his echo nodded in semi-relief.

Having a chainling of your own is the only way youll win here, Kraisten pressed on. Youve faced a monster like this before, so you know what its like. And keep in mind that the one you fought back then was severely injured. This one isnt, and theres no army to help you.

Dallion looked at the creature. It had grown so large that it was almost touching the top of the arch. Defeating it in his current state was impossible.

After all, what is an echo, but an extension of yourself? Sacrificing it is the same as sacrificing yourself. And dont you want to sacrifice yourself for the greater good of your friends?

That was the one question that Dallion needed to answer.

Chapter 189: Inner Revelation

The chainling snarled. Not a single emotion was visible in it, yet Dallion knew it had nothing but hatred towards him and everything else in the world. Its only purpose was to destroy everything in sight except its creator.

Fear crept in Dallions mind. He looked at the dagger in his hand. Was this all he needed to create a monster of his own? As one of his exes would say, it was fifty-fifty. Either it would work out or it wouldnt. Yet Dallion was most afraid of the things that would happen if it did work out. He could well win the challenge, but would the chainling he created remain stuck in his awakening realm forever?

Times up, Kraisten said.

On the instant, the massive chainling leapt forward. It was nowhere as fast as Kierra and Aspian had been, but it didnt have to.

Dallions echo also sprang into action, playing a melody of weight in the hopes it would affect the approaching monster. Dallions own hesitation quickly vanished as he joined in.

The uncertain meow told him not to count on it. Still, there had to be a way. Dallion remembered how both his familiars had their powers boosted during his fight against the Star. If he could achieve the same here, he had a chance.

Dallion let go of his dagger and summoned the harpsisword. Despite his hope, it wasnt glowing.

If he was going to fight fire with fire, it was going to be on his own terms. A layer of blue flame enveloped the harpsisword. Against a normal enemy, such a weapon was highly inefficient. Against a chainling, though, Dallion had a feeling it would be devastating.

You really are reckless, Dallions echo said. Then again, so am I. Ill be backup, you see what you can do with that thing.

It was time for some splitting. Dallion concentrated. In his mind, four more instances of him formed, all charging at the chainling. One tried to jump and take the creature head on, while the rest ventured to attack it from the side. Tendrils emerged from the chainling. All instances managed to block them with their armadil shield. The one who had attacked head on was quickly wrapped in them and engulfed in darkness.

Stepping to the side, Dallion sliced off several of the tendrils. The sword went through them like a hot knife through butter causing the chainling to growl in pain. So far the theory that healing was bad for chainlings held true. All that Dallion had to do now was

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

What the heck?!

Not only that, but the music from his echo had also stopped. A quick glance revealed why the echo was no more. Instead, there was a dagger on the ground, which promptly disappeared as Dallion was looking at it.

Kierra, he grumbled. She had proven to be quite annoying, more so than Aspion. It was interesting to note that she also had a preference for ranged attacks, very much like Gloria. The difference was that she used daggers.

Concentrating, Dallion tried to create another echo in his mind, but the spark wasnt there. Before he could put more effort in it, the chainlings paw came his way. The armadil shield extended to offer optimal protection, but this time, the moment the black claws touched it, they spread their blackness all over it.

Lux, cover the shield! Dallion shouted, but it was too late.

Half consumed by darkness, the shield unstrapped from his arm falling to the ground. For a moment Dallion thought he heard a faint Sorry whispered in the air, before his shield turned into a puddle of black goo that then trickled onto the chainling.

Good attempt, Dallions grandfather said. Futile, but good. Despite everything you think you know you cannot imagine the destructive power of a battle trained chainling. As he spoke metal segments covered the black form, encasing it in a suit of armadil armor. Chainlings can do more than attack, they can adapt the world around them to suit their needs. Everything one throws at them becomes part of them.

Not everything! Dallion shouted back as he split again. The Dame managed to kill one.

Tendrils shot through three of his instances, while the last one managed to slice them off before that. Dallion chose that instance.

The Dame had magic, Kraisten said with a frown. You dont. This is your last chance. I really want you to pass this trial, but you cannot unless you make a chainling of your own. And since youre out of echoes, Ill make things easy for you.

On cue, Kierra jumped off the arch and started making her way slowly towards Dallion.

Use your dagger on Kierra, Dallions grandfather said. Youve seen her skills. Just imagine how powerful shell be when she changes into something like that.

This is just part of the trial! Dallion felt disgusted by the offer.

Sacrificing an echo was bad enough, but sacrificing a living person that was worthy of having limitations placed on ones awakened powers. Was that what had happened? Had his grandfather transformed someone else into a chainling to gain victory? Dallion definitely had considered the thought, otherwise it wouldnt be present in this trial. But just as much as he feared it might be true, he also refused to believe it.

This was the classic villain moment, but it also was what Dallion had been doing. In several of his battles he had offered the guardians a chance to surrender. For the most part he had done so out of good intentions, but there also was an element of pride involvedhe had seen himself superior to them. His grandfather was doing the same. The offer to create his own chainling was nothing more than a surrender. At this point Dallion had no doubt that it was the wrong approach to have. The solution was to take advantage of the momentary calm and strike the heart of the chainling with his sword. If he used Noxs ability, he could create an opening in the monsters armor, then plunge the harpsisword inside. The layer of blue flame was going to protect Harp from harm while it tore up the chainling from the inside. Dallion could see all of this happen in his mind. Likely he was going to suffer a few more attacks from Kierra, but that was going to be easily remedied with Luxs healing ability. After that it would be all a matter of

Dallion paused. Only now did he finally realize the actual meaning of this trial. All the leveling up trials in his mind were battles against his own faults and weaknesses. He had to have the skills and strength to go through them, of course, but that wasnt the main issuethe main issue was him. His opponent wasnt the chainling, it wasnt even his grandfather, it was the series of circumstances that threatened to make him into a monster. Defeating that danger couldnt be achieved by delaying the encounterwhich Dallion had been doing since the paradox cubenor could it be done by throwing gasoline into the fire. The only way to win was to attack the root of the problem and to prove he had the strength to see it through.

You never offered to sacrifice yourself, Dallion said. He had still split himself in three instances, in case the chainling decided to attack again.

As I said, forgers are stronger from the back lines.

So, youre a manager, not a leader? Dallion referenced the popular meme.

Does it matter? Kraisten didnt blink. Seeds of anger spouted in him all too visible thanks to Dallions music skills. There are no managers or leaders on the battlefield. There are only generals and soldiers. The side with their general still standing at the end is the one thats victorious.

Does that mean that if I defeat you all this will be over?

A crack formed at the base of the arch, slowly making its way up. There was no doubt in Dallions mind what that was.

Yes, Kraisten laughed. Thats all you should have done from the very beginning. You wasted all that time on trivial matters, instead of going for the heart of the matter. I even joined in the fight to make things easy for you.

No, I dont think you ever made anything easy for me. You acted exactly as I would haverecklessly and cowardly.

Are you calling yourself a coward?

After all the times Id relied on others to find solutions for me, I guess the description fits. But no, Im calling you a coward because you are my fear of what I might become a bundle of false bravado hiding behind skills and armies. The sentence sounded way cringier when said out loud than it had in Dallions mind, but it had served its purpose. Every sound resonated with weight and slowness. Well, I have a surprise for you. Im not playing by those rules.

A web of cracks emerged beneath Kraistens feet, shattering the support he was standing on. Normally it would be an easy matter for someone to jump to one of the remaining stone pillars, but Kraisten weighed three times more in his current state, and similar to Dallion, he didnt have athletic or acrobatic skills.

A thundering roar filled the air. The chainling desperately tried to eject the harpsisword from it, but with each attempt, the weapon moved further in.

Stay out of it, Dallion told Kierra, as he started his way to the spot his grandfather had hit the ground.

The woman hesitated. Two daggers appeared in her hands. Moments later, two echoes emerged next to Dallion, each with a copy of a harpsisword and armadil shield.

He says stay out of it, one of the echoes repeated.

Raging in agony, the chainling slammed the ground, desperately trying to get rid of the source of pain inside it. Whole chunks of the earth he was in contact with transformed into black goo, merging with it, though doing little to address the problem.

Dallion knew that defeating the real deal wouldnt be nearly as easy, but he felt a certain sense of satisfaction from the result. Hastening his pace, he continued forward. After a short while, he had finally reached his grandfather. The fall had broken the mans legs, making him unable to move.

Even so, Dallion was on his guard. There were quite a few weapons that could deal damage from a distance.

Using a crackling to attack my support, but not me, Kraisten said, looking up. Smart. Not that I expected anything less. I told you you'd need a monster to defeat me, and you proved me wrong.

It was impressive. Dallion smiled. But I haven't defeated you.

You will now. In this state all it takes is a single strike. Even your cat can finish me off.

I'm not here to finish you off. Dallion shook his head.

Of course not. You're here to offer me to surrender so you feel better about yourself.

I could have done that, but I know you wouldn't accept. Would you?

No. I don't think I would.

That's why I came to offer a truce. My fight never was with you, it was with myself. I guess you're part of me in some way, so there was a slight pause. Complicated logic wasn't Dallion's strong suit. What I'm saying is that you don't need to be gone. You can stay here as an echo to keep me in check if I take things too far.

You'd want a false copy of your grandfather to stay in your realm in case you go off the rails? There's no way that could go wrong, right?

It sounded a lot less weird in my head, but yes. Dallion nodded. And also no. You're not a copy of my grandpa, you're just an echo of myself.

There was a long moment of silence. In the background the chainling exploded with the strength of a barrel of dynamite, scattering dirt in all directions. Completing its goal, the harpsisword disappeared mid-flight, leaving only a very confused Lux flapping in the air.

In that case Kraisten's features slowly distorted until there was a perfect copy of Dallion lying on the ground I accept.

You have broken through your barrier

Your level has increased to 14

Choose the focus that will serve you best

Chapter 190: Practical Lessons

Returning to reality after a leveling was unlike what Dallion had experienced so far. After a while every awakened developed the ability to switch effortlessly between awakened realms and the real world. Naturally, the longer the time spent in the awakened realm, the more difficult it became to remember all the details after returning. That was one of the main reasons why most guild jobs had all participants sitting or lying down to diminish the confusion.

Personal leveling was completely different. Not only the world seemed different, but so did Dallion's point of view. It was like returning home after decades and going through his childhood toys. Everything in the room was the same, but it also seemed different. The items, the way he arranged things, the condition of the floor and bed it all seemed as if they were from a past life.

In one word, none. I might be linked to you, but I remain a foreign echo. There are certain things in your realm I cant see, especially if you dont want me to.

That was a relief. The experience was something Dallion didnt want anyone else seeing, at least not immediately.

Right.

The echo was the epitome of Dallions change. In that regard, it was no wonder that he was still confused. In time things would probably settle down, just as they would with Dallion himself. For the moment, though, the echo could use a bit of time alone in the new space of the awakening realm.

Gen,

Arent there a bit too many generals in your life lately?

I only count those who deserve it.

There was a moment of dry laughter. After the moment was gone, Dallion started thinking back to events in the real world. He was supposed to be on his way to the guildhall, along with Gloria and Veil. Last he remembered, he had come up to his room for a moment. The moment had passed, so now it was time to go back down. Before that, though, Dallion went to inspect the stone orchid. The plant had remained unchanged ever since he had bought it. At present there seemed to be slight lines along the stony surface, like petals preparing to bloom. Maybe it was Dallions new level that had prompted the change, or maybe increasing his perception to sixteen let him see what was always there. Either way, it looked much more beautiful than before, almost delicate in a way untypical for a stone.

Any idea where I can get more of these, shield? Dallion asked. I think my brother would appreciate one.

Thanks. I might do that.

Getting his gear ready, Dallion spent a few more moments getting reacquainted with his room, then went out.

The Luors were still at the table when he got back. Strangely enough, there was still a large amount of food waiting for him, despite Hannahs earlier threat. One glance at her was enough to see that she knew exactly what had happened.

You took your time, Veil said, tapping on the edge of the table with his thumbs.

Is everything alright? Gloria asked. She too had noticed a change in Dallions attitude, although she couldnt put her finger on it.

Everythings fine. Dallion smiled and started eating.

Never before had food tasted so well. It didnt take long for him to finish the dish in front of him, then continued with whatever other remains were left. Hannahs judgment was spot on the food was enough to make Dallion feel better, although not to completely fill him up. Maybe hed have more at the guild there was always an excuse for free food there.

Ready to go? Dallion looked at Veil and Gloria.

Were the ones waiting for you, Veil grumbled.

Then lets get going. With nothing but that, Dallion stood up and went outside. Veil was first to follow, bringing both his swords, of course. Half a minute later, Gloria also showed up.

Dallion had no idea what she and Hannah had spoken about, and for once he didnt care. All those minor fears and concerns he had in the past seemed so trivial after his personal awakening.

Indeed, he is, dear boy. And hell be there for quite a while. It seems that dear March is upset with him about something, so they are having a long discussion on the matter. One thing I find amusing about her is that she always prefers to have her arguments in real life. Not very cultured on her part, but interesting nonetheless.

More guild politics. That was something Dallion could do without. Still, it was curious to know what March was angry with his mentor. Was it something to do with the world item, or something more mundane?

The guildhall was fairly full when Dallion and the Luors arrived. As before, Gloria and Veil gathered a large amount of attention as well as a few requests to join a few teams as packrats. All attempts were completely ignored as the trio waited patiently in the line to reach Estezol.

Finally, fifteen minutes later, it was their turn.

Back so soon, Dal? Estezol asked, somewhat confused. Anything the matter?

Theyre here for their pay, Dallion clarified.

Ah. The bearded mans expression instantly changed from confusion to understanding. Of course. Just give me a moment.

The man went away, only to return shortly after with two rather large pouches.

Sorry about that. Weve had a lot of cob completions today. He took a few silver coins from one pouch, then counted eighteen from the other, arranging them in two piles. Here you go. Estezol smiled. And thank you for splendid job.

Mentally, Dallion laughed. Seeing Estezol starstruck was somewhat amusing. One of these days maybe Dallion was going to look into the mystery why were pure blonds so revered.

Wheres Vend? Dallion asked.

Ah. Well, hes somewhat occupied at the moment. Why?

I was thinking he could do some mentoring. The last fight showed me I still have a few things to learn and

Just a moment. Without explanation, Estezol rushed off and up the staircase. This was fairly unusual behavior. Dallion looked at his friends, who only shared a shrug in response.

For over a minute, everyone stood there waiting. The Luors had collected their reward and started discussing what to do with their newfound fortune. Visiting a theatre was considered, especially by Gloria, who wanted to compare her skills with professionals. Veil, on his part, was more amused by the idea than anything and willing to spend enough to satisfy his curiosity. Metal prices were also a topic of conversation. Dherma construction was also on their mind, along with architectural styles. In his mind Dallion imagined a futuristic city made of steel and glass, like in Earth science fiction movies. As cool as it sounded, Dallion doubted it would be a good match for this world, although one never knew. With the ability to improve buildings, that was a valid possibility. All it was going to take was changing stone to glass, which was possible with enough crafting skills. Would the inhabitants appreciate it, though?

Apologies. Estezol rushed back close to five minutes later. I got dragged in an impromptu meeting. The Good news is that after all that, Vend will finally start sharing some practical knowledge with you.

Thanks. Dallion almost felt pity towards Vend. The meeting couldnt have been easy for him, considering how much he disliked teaching. Basement training rooms?

Oh, no. Vend is waiting for you outside. That was one of his requeststhat he not be forced to mentor you in the guildhall. Hes being childish, if you ask me, but he was very adamant on that.

I guess Ill see you this evening, Dallion turned to Veil and Gloria. Try not to spend all of it on nonsense.

Its my money. Veil crossed his arms. Ill spend it on any crap I like.

Err. Estezol waved timidly, interrupting their conversation. Vend will be training all of you.

Huh? Dallion blinked. That was beyond surprising.

It was discussed and March agreed to that that it would be better for Vend to have more than a single trainee. Given that the three of you are already such a good team, it was only natural that you be his first group.

Now things became much clearer. Vend probably thought that he was in hell right now, and given his reluctance to the concept it was possible that was the blocker that kept him from leveling up. In the end, of the day everyone had their fears, and elites were no exception.

The place of training chosen by Vend, funnily enough, was the Stone Gardens. With the place cleaned and mended to perfection, it had an almost mystical appearance. Of course, that didn't make it any less empty than before. Given the crowds of the city, that was a good thing.

Vend was easy to find, leaning against one of the larger stone columns. The moment he saw them, he shook his head. That definitely wasn't the best way to start the training session.

Hey, Vend. Dallion tried to break the ice. His music skills told him that his mentor wasn't pleased with the current situation. At the same time, he had enough of a sense of duty to get on with it.

Hey. Vend nodded. As you've learned, I've been tasked to train you. I won't lie, I'm not happy with this, and it's not something I'm good at, but it's something that has to be done.

Has to be done? Gloria asked.

Reasons you don't have to worry about, okay? Vend said with a frown. You're free to leave at any point. I won't give advice to people who don't want to accept it.

That's not what I meant. A grain of annoyance appeared in Gloria, along with a walnut of fear. She and Veil were really looking forward to this lesson, although both did their best not to show it.

Moving on, we'll start with the basics. No doubt some of you have been taught a whole bunch of theories regarding skills, stats, and everything else awakened. Vend looked at Dallion. It was no secret he had a low regard of Adzorgs teaching methods. In that way he was closer to Eury in terms of thinking more of a doer than a talker. Well, I'm here to tell you that most of that's crap.

Veil snorted in agreement. That seemed to improve Vends mood slightly.

The four basic stats, he went on. You all know them, you've all used them, so I won't go through that. Instead, I'll go right to the less obvious aspects of them. For example, the more you level up your body, the more you'll need to maintain it with training in the real world.

I knew that, Veil said confidently.

Dallion, on the other hand, didn't. So far, he had thought that improving the stat was enough to make him stronger, and by all accounts it was. Now that his body level was at twelve, he could do much more than when it was at three. The only reason he did a moderate amount of real world physical training in his room was because the armadil shield kept pestering him that real world training sculpted the muscles better.

For the most part it won't matter, Vend went on. The fights you have while improving an item, and that goes for packrats, is enough to keep the body in shape. If you want to boost your physical

skills, though, you'll have to put in some real work. And that means not doing everything you could in the awakened world.

If you want to get smarter through stats, your safer bet is to level up reaction and not mind. Vend paused, waiting for reactions. As expected, all three of his trainees stared at him, eyes wide with surprise. Reaction makes your reflexes faster, which is the same as making decisions faster. I'm sure some scholar would tell you that's not the same as making you smarter, but if it takes you half a week to come to a decision instead of a week, that's twice smarter in my book.

In that case, what does mind do? Dallion asked.

Mind is a whole different thing altogether. It provides you with options, which in practical terms means you get to see all those shiny markers while in the realms. The higher your mind level, the sooner you'll get to see them.

That was a bit of a shock. All this time, Dallion believed he had improved beyond the need for markers. The harsh truth was that his mind was simply unable to keep up. Like a last generation processor trying to run the latest games, he was taking longer to see the possible enemy attack trajectories, relying on gut feeling instead.

And one more thing. Mind is what lets you be good at splitting.