

Leveling up 191

Chapter 191: Being too Good

In effect, splitting is nothing other than possible paths for you to take, Vend said. Think of it as the flip side of markers. Markers give you options you react to. Splits show you the result of actions you take.

It would only have confused you. Its not like you actually gave any thought to the way you improved your attributes. What was it again? I want all tens because its a round number?

Dallion felt he could strangle Nil. However, since doing so would destroy the echo, he would have to restrain himself.

Okay, let me try explaining this way, Vend said, looking at Dallions annoyed expression. Think of it as going back in time and doing an attack differently. Then, seeing the results you get to choose that attack of the two, thats better. Makes sense?

Yeah, Veil replied.

Perfectly, Gloria nodded.

Eh, sure. Dallion straightened up. He felt as if he were back in high school and was caught whispering with a friend during class.

Vend gave him a suspicious look, but then went on.

No one knows the precise number of splits you can make, but increasing your mind, lets you do more.

Shut up!

The reaction was a bit harsh, but there was nothing worse than having an echo second guessing someone during an explanation. Nil, apparently got the hint, for he stopped with his commentary.

Splitting is a way to gain an edge in battle. Just one note of warning, until you get really good at it dont rely on it blindly.

What happens if its used on us? Dallion asked. He had gone through a few such instances and the results were nearly always bad. Is there a way to use splitting to defend against splitting?

There was a moment of pause. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could see that Vend was somewhat taken aback, but also impressed with the question.

In general, yes. Though it takes passing through the next gate to do it effectively. Either way, you need to increase your mind a lot for that.

So much for that option. As things stood, mind was of Dallions lowest attributes. At present, he was focusing on improving his perception as much as possible to be able to see marker layers. Now it turned out he also had to improve his mind to actually see the markers on time. Apparently, Nil was right when he had warned Dal not to go along that route. High perception seemed to be a gorgons thing.

Another little-known fact is that splitting can also be used in real life, Vend said.

How? Veil immediately asked.

Have a coin on you?

Veil nodded.

Toss one over.

After a moments hesitation, Veil took a silver coin from his pouch and tossed it to Vend. The elite caught it, then closed both hands.

Any guesses? Vend asked.

No need to guess. We saw in which hand it is, Vend smirked.

Dallion had to agree. There didnt seem to be any tricks involved. However, if it was so obvious, why was he asking? For a split second, Dallion considered asking Nil what the trick was. Quickly, he changed his mind. For one thing he didnt think the echo would provide assistance, especially considering this was a teachable moment.

Right hand, Gloria said.

Its obvious, isnt it? Vend asked. Its easy since youre using your perception. And even if you didnt you had a one in two chance of getting it right. Using splitting, there is no guessing. Vend opened his right hand. To everyones surprise, there was nothing there. Ive been splitting myself all this time. In one instance I caught the coin and moved it to my left hand, in another instant I didnt. That way any hand you picked would be wrong.

Dear boy, you can use all your skills in the real world. The only difference is that they are real. Markers, health rectangles, weapon summoning, all those are merely concepts so they can only gain form in the awakened realms. The skills, on the other hand, can be used anywhere. Arent you using your music skills on him right now?

That was a fair point. Dallion was indeed using his music skills a lot lately. While he couldnt see the emotional vibrations with the same clarity he did in the awakened realms, he definitely had a sense of them.

This is just an example to prove the point, Vend tossed the coin back to Veil. The moral of the story is, dont gamble with awakened unless youre prepared to lose.

Does that mean if we get good enough, we can redo past mistakes in the real world? Dallion asked.

No, Vend looked at him. This is the extent of my ability and Im mind focused. Given your development, it would be extremely difficult. At most it might help you with split-second decisions. That doesnt mean you cant use splitting in the awakened realms.

Vend cracked his fingers. The sound made Gloria wince.

One more thing you wont find in any scroll. Focusing on more attributes or skills isnt always a good thing. It wont be noticeable until you become a double digit, but each focus takes from the rest.

Any questions so far?

No one said a word.

Good. Now we get to the important part. Vend took a step forward. Join me inside the garden realm. He extended his hand forward.

It didnt take long for all three of his trainees to grab hold of it.

AREA AWAKENING

The surroundings changed as the four entered the realm of the stone garden. Rocks and rock pillars were everywhere as before. This time, though, there was no black smoke to be seen.

You did a pretty good job here, Vend said. A bit reckless for my taste, but it worked for the most part.

Are you saying we missed something? Gloria asked in a semi-indignant tone. Now that they were in the awakened realm, her emotions were much more visible, vibrating brightly in shades of blue.

As far as Dallion could say, there was no indication the realm wasnt flawless. Then again, given this was a large city, a lot could have happened since morning. It would be some kind of record for someone to have trashed a part of the garden so fast, though.

Im saying that you took more effort than you had to. Getting achievements is fun, but its not good in the long run. Trust me. Seeing how easy you took out the first crack settlement, you should have gone along the longer route. You had a week to complete your job, so there was no point in rushing it.

Strictly speaking that wasnt true. As Estezol had pointed out, Dallion wasnt allowed other tasks until the completion of this one. Maybe there was some deep point behind that, but the way things were presented to him, there was absolutely no sense in not getting it done as quickly as possible.

Thats for another time, though. Vend changed the subject. Were here because the lord mayor has given the guild another request. Since weve done such a good job mending the gardens, he has asked that we improve the garden as well.

Dallion could see the shock in the Luors as if they had openly gasped.

Im sure you two know how its done, given that you have done it before. This time, theres a slight catch. The garden is part of the mayors domain and must remain that way. This is something

common in sanitation jobs. We often get requests to improve an area, but must be careful not to become the new owners of it.

So, we must improve all the guardians, except the key one? Veil asked.

Not quite. This area is a bit different. Its not a district or village, so there are no other area guardians. In order to improve the area, we must defeat him.

Thats impossible, Veil said with absolute certainty. If we defeat a guardian, we become the owner of the area.

No, theres a way, but it isnt pleasant.

When it became clear what the way was, Dallion and the Luors had to agree. Initially, Dallion had hoped that the area could be treated as an item: all they had to do was transfer it to the city or the lord mayor and everything would be settled. That turned out not to be the case. Area guardians were an entirely different matter. Maybe due to their size, or maybe because they didnt physically change hands as much as items, they remained loyal to the person who defeated them. Just handing them over to the city wouldnt be enough, and would definitely not be accepted by the local nobility. Instead, the solution was to have a member of the Nerosals ruling household participate in the fight itself. By participating, however, it meant that they were to perform the final killing blow. That wasnt the annoying part, however. In order not to waste a nobles time, the party had to beat down the guardian to such an extent that a simple attack would finish him off. Also, everyone from the group had to escape from the area before the final blow took place. What that meant other than the humiliation was that none of them would receive any rewards for the work theyve done. Instead, it would be the noble who would level up and become the new de facto owner of the garden.

Finally, Dallion had a good idea why so many awakened guilds preferred not to take on city jobs. Sanitation was bad enough, but at least there was a chance that someone might be lucky and get an achievement of some sort. Improvement of city property was guaranteed to have no reward other than the money spent on the job. As an awakened, Dallion felt himself being robbed.

After a few more explanations and a bit of chit-chat, the group set off through the realm there was one more annoying task they had to do before the battle could take place: scout out the guardian and determine its strength and attacks so they could form a strategy for the real thing.

This definitely isnt how we did things back home, Veil grumbled. Next to him, Gloria nodded a few times in silent agreement.

Dallion couldnt help but smile. Apparently, there was spoiled, and then there was outright rotten. Back in the days of the former village chief, there was no question that members of the Luor family were spoiled beyond belief. Nothing they had done, though, could compare to an actual noble of Nerosal. So far Dallion hadnt even seen one, and that was very deliberate. High-ranking nobles didnt mingle with the populace, except on a few rare occasions. That was another reason why the festival was so popular it was a chance for a common person awakened or other to get a glimpse of the illustrious owner of the entire county. In a sense, it was literally the event of the year.

Well, no. Even the guild master doesnt have that much sway. Were a small guild, after all. It was a bet.

What?!

Apparently, you finishing the job in record time prompted some nobles to bet that you couldnt improve the area by the end of the day. Given the amount of favor such a request carries, it was impossible for the guild master to refuse.

Just great. So not only will we do all this for nothing, but well have an angry noble on our backs when were done.

Dont be so dramatic. Nobles can be petty, but not about things such as this. It would be the same for someone to hold a grudge against a coin because of fell heads instead of tails.

That didnt make Dallion feel any better. If anything, it illustrated the rift between nobility and everyone else. It also further explained why the Dame couldnt compliment him directly during the chainling hunt. However, one question remained. If Falkner was part of such a world, what was he actually doing in the Icepicker guild? Despite what he claimed, there had to be more to it than getting to train under March.

Chapter 192: Rock Scouting

In a world of stones, it turned out that perception was key. From what Vend explained, the guardian was hidden somewhere in plain sight, waiting for the conditions to react. The problem was that plain sight referred to a realm that spread thousands of miles in every direction. There were some pillars, stone piles, separate stones, and an endless supply of pebbles that composed the ground. Each of those could effectively be the guardianas Dallion knew well, size was also flexible in the realms. Supposedly the appearance of the guardian, even in its sleeping state, was such that they would know it when they saw it.

I saw its blue, Veil said. Like everyone else, he was bored out of his skill after an hour of walking. And when he got bored, he liked to fight or talk. Since there was no fighting involved, the rest of the group had to suffer every thought that came out of his mind.

You said that five minutes ago. Gloria gave him an irritated glance. You just changed the color.

Not my fault Im low on perception. He shrugged. Any of you watch birds see anything?

Obligatory silence followed. The truth was that despite their high perception, neither Gloria nor Dallion had spotted anything remotely different. If there was a case of every single rock and pebble looking like every other, this was it.

The gorgons perception was out of this world, or at the very least in the mid-thirties. It had been two weeks since Dallion had seen her, much longer in terms of real time, and despite all the challenges that constantly occupied his mind, he hadnt stopped thinking about her. Lately, one of the things he would play over in his mind was how to handle the moment she and Gloria met. Logically, there was nothing wrong with him introducing one to the other. He and Gloria were just

friends, so there was no reason for jealousy. However, in the back of his mind, Dallion dreaded the day. Focusing on his real-life splitting might be a good solution for this.

In moments like these Dallion wished he could have a long discussion on the matter with the armadil shield guardian. If anything, the dryad had centuries of experience in that area. There also was the option to talk about it with Harp, but Dallion felt ashamed. Discussing it with her felt like discussing his girlfriends with his mother—ultimately useful, but left as a very final resort.

Were taking a break, Vend said, then pointed to one of the taller pillars in the vicinity. Up there.

Out of curiosity, have you ever done this before? Gloria asked.

Once. That's why I told you it's an unpleasant experience. And it's not only about the loss of level.

Oh?

You'll find out soon enough. I don't want to ruin the surprise. The momentary smirk indicated that it was going to be anything but that.

It took five minutes to reach the pillar and twice as many to reach the top. Vend and Gloria were first thanks to their athletic and acrobatic skill combination. Veil could have been there as well, but he chose to help out Dallion climbing up and not miss an opportunity for chatting on various topics. Most were boring topics, but out of nowhere, an interesting topic emerged.

How does it feel being a double digit? Veil asked as they had reached a third of the way up.

For the first time, it was Dallion on the opposite side of the tell only what you know situation. While he considered Veil his friend and wanted to help him pass his double-digit test, he had to abide by the restrictions imposed by the Moons. As far as the world was concerned, Veil remained a single digit awakened and could not be told anything specific about the things that were to come.

It's different, Dallion replied after some thought. You'll find out when you pass the trial.

I see. Do you think it's worth it?

Was passing the trial to full awakenedness worth it? Dallion tried not to laugh so as not to lose his balance. Despite his many improvements, scaling a stone pillar—even one made of massive stones one atop the other—remained difficult without the appropriate skills.

Yeah, I suppose you're right, Veil smiled. You're really bad at climbing, you know?

I do know. That's why Vend is asking me to do this. At least he suspected as much. Would have helped if I had some athletic skills. Or carpentry. Maybe then he could chisel some footholds.

You'll get your chance. Lower tier skills are easy to get.

The conversation then quickly devolved on philosophical topics, then to Dherma village. Apparently after just a week Veil was starting to get concerned about the place. His mind was set to remain until the end of the festival, of course, but that didn't stop him from worrying. That was what it meant to be a domain owner, apparently. Dallion couldn't empathize, but he had a vague notion of what it was like.

As it turned out, his suspicions that the area was linked to Veil were correct. Gloria, while also taking an active part in leveling up Dherma, was not linked to any area, not even the village chiefs mansion.

Anytime today will be good, Dal, Vend shouted from above. Patience was clearly not his strong suit.

Getting there! Dallion shouted. Its not easy when you dont have the skills, you know!

Just grab hold of me, Veil whispered.

You sure?

Heh. This isnt the first time Ive done this.

In almost any other circumstances this would have been humiliating, but given how difficult it was, Dallion gladly let Veil give him a piggyback as the blonde climbed his way up to the top. Once there, the view of the entire realm became visible. In the past it was difficult for Dallion to spot the end of a realm, but thanks to his improved perception, he was now able to see a faint mist on the horizon. Even so, the sight was impressive. Back on Earth Dallion had never been to mount Everest or any mountain top for that matter, but he had a vague idea it could be something like this.

Time for a few more practical tricks, Vend said. Unless in times of war, area guardians are pretty quiet. For the most part, they dont want to get involved. For the most part, thats goodwe dont have to worry about them during sanitation missions. It also means that theyve become very irritable.

Dallion felt uneasy for some reason. Was Vend suggesting what he thought he was suggesting?

If we cant spot a guardian outright, the solution is to peeve him off enough. There are lots of ways to do this. Ill show you the simplest. He looked at Veil. Shatter this pillar in two.

Silence hung in the air.

A crude method, but efficient

Up to the bottom, if you could, Vend added, as if to confirm Nils statement. The more we hurt the realm, the quicker the guardian will pop up to stop us. When he does, well see his hiding spot and then get to fight a bit in order to get a feel for the real thing.

Wont that ruin our efforts? Dallion asked. Personally, he much rather would have the guardian surrender than deliberately hurting the realm. I mean we spent a lot of effort getting the realm fully mended

Weve already been paid for that job. This one is only to get the area leveled up. Besides, you can always mend to a hundred percent afterwards if you want to.

While the answer was perfectly logical, it wasnt what Dallion wanted to hear. Knowing Vends opinion on guardian surrender, though, he was unlikely to be convinced by anything Dallion could say.

Also, youll get to see one other treathow cracks are born within a realm.

Dallion looked at Veil. The blond was somewhat taken aback, but even so summoned Hannah's sword. The weapon glistened red in bloodlust, knowing what it would be used for. Everyone stepped towards the edge of the top rock of the pillar. Then, Veil performed his strike.

There was no long preparation, no warnings, just a single chop that split the air and the rocks beneath. It was nothing like slicing a cake, nor was it like any of the animations Dallion had seen back on earth. The sword stopped halfway in the rocks. The force it projected, however, created a crack then went on down, breaking rock after rock like a lightning bolt.

Jump! Vend said.

Everyone did so, with Gloria grabbing Dallion the only person who didn't have the skills to actually do so. Beneath them the entire pillar toppled, like during a controlled explosion. Black wolf-like silhouettes of shadow emerged from within the pillar as it crumbled, let loose into the realm. As they did, Dallion heard Nox hiss within his realm a new pack of cracklings was born.

Without a moment's hesitation, the creatures rushed in all directions. A few leapt in the direction of the falling awakened, only to get a few daggers in them from Vend. By the time the ground reached the ground, all cracks were either dead or rushing off in the distance.

Those aren't gremlins, Veil noted as he put away his sword.

Sudden cracks are always wild. Give them a few years and they'll turn into packs and then who knows.

Guard up, Vend said, paying absolutely no attention to Dallion. The guardian will appear soon.

How can you be so sure? Veil wondered.

What would you do if there's an ant biting you? the elite replied. Squish it or chase it off.

The ground trembled. It started as a slight shake, then increased in intensity to the point that Dallion had difficulty standing. Then, all of a sudden, the rumbling stopped. A few miles away, the ground erupted in a geyser of rocks. Peddles rained down as water, while the massive form of the guardian emerged.

There, Vend pointed. Remember the location!

Everyone looked in the direction in question. The most distinguishable characteristics were three stone pillars next to each other. One of the really tall pillars was also visible in the distance behind them. As far as landmarks in the realm went, these were as good as any.

A giant hand of stones rose up from the ground, followed by a second a short distance away. In cartoon fashion the two slammed down on the ground, pushing up the entire torso of the guardian. It was enormous roughly the size of the mountain colossus Dallion had fought. Dallion was probably half the size of its little finger, but that was not the worse part. As the guardian rose up, some of the larger rocks that were thrown into the air by its action did not fall back down. Instead, they started circling the creature of their own volition.

STONE GARDEN GUARDIAN

Species: Mountain Colossus

Class: Air

Statistics: 100 HP

Skills

- **Rock projectiles**

- **Rain of pebbles**

- **Air shield**

- **Air tendrils**

Weak spots: Tendons

Fought anything like this before? Vend asked, amused by the thought.

Once, Veil replied. But it wasn't this big.

Don't worry. We're not here to kill it. All we need to do is figure out how it fights. Everything else can wait for the real thing.

Sure Dallion uttered under his breath.

One last piece of advice. Attack as little as possible. Area guardians are fast at picking up combat moves. Leave your best for the real fight.

COMBAT INITIATED

Chapter 193: Terminal Wounds

A block of annoyance wasn't something Dallion would have thought to be more than a metaphor. That was before he found himself staring at one. As far as emotions went, looking at the garden guardian with his music skill was the same as having it color blue all over.

The thought sent chills down Dallion's spine. He was extremely fortunate that Nox had a positive attitude towards him. If the crackling had a mean streak, there would have been a lot of constant repairs required in his realm.

How do you want to tackle it? Vend asked.

Everyone stared at him.

Isn't that something you should decide? Dallion dared to voice the obvious question. Being the group leader and all?

An attack on all sides is the obvious choice, Gloria said, careful not to over-commit to anything. We'll see the limit of its perception and how it reacts to a multi attack.

Charge straight ahead to get its attention, while the rest of you flank it, Veil added.

Nodding several times to each of the suggestions, Vend then turned to Dallion.

Dal?

Use music to slow it down and disorientate it? Dal asked hesitantly. Just to see how it reacts to music? And to see if it reacts at all. As it were, some guardians had a natural immunity to music manipulation. Colossuses weren't supposed to be among that group, according to what Dallion had read in the ring library scrolls on guardians, but there was no telling whether this one wouldn't end up being an exception of some sort.

No, Vend said, disappointed. We charge at it and let it make the first move. After that we see.

The idea wasn't that bad. Since this was the first time the guardian had faced people so Dallion hoped it had no base of reference. If the group charged at it without doing anything that approached an attack, that behavior would remain ingrained in the guardian's mind for their next encounter. Even so, there was something unnerving about running toward a mountain knowing the plan of action was to let the mountain hit them.

Stay close, Gloria said. If something happens I or Veil will grab you.

Just like the sandstorm dragon? Dallion smiled. It had been a while since he had used his Darude war cry.

Better I hope, Gloria chuckled.

The distance between the group and the guardian halved, then halved again. The moment they passed the invisible threshold of its range, the colossus reacted. With a precise motion, it slammed several of the orbiting rocks towards Vend and the rest, as if it were participating in a tennis tournament. Green markers appeared around Vend, though not anyone else.

Someones invested a lot in mind

, Dallion thought.

Not waiting for his own markers to appear, Dallion went to the side. He had hardly made a single step when Gloria grabbed him as she leaped away to safety. Moments later, the rock hit the ground, sending off sparks in all directions. Interestingly enough, neither the rock itself nor the smaller pebbles seemed damaged by the impact. Apparently, the guardian was gentle towards everything in its realm except for intruders.

I'd have made it, Dallion said as Gloria let him go. Might have been a bit close, but I'd have made it.

The glance she gave him said it all, expressing doubt and certain amounts of humor and affection. Meanwhile, a short distance away Veil was all aggression, continuing straight forward like an arrow. Several more rocks were flung in his direction, only to be ignored.

Idiot, Gloria whispered.

The firebird appeared on his shoulder, then popped off like a rocket. The sudden appearance and disappearance made Gloria hop, then redden as she got flustered by her reaction. Clearly, she remained a noble at heart, even if to a small village.

Join in, Vend shouted as he went for the flank on the further side of the guardian. Taking the hint., Dallion and Gloria ran on forward as well.

It didnt take long for the group to get in close proximity to the guardian. Having to deal with the annoyance that was Veil, had grabbed the colossus attention, allowing the rest to reach it without problem. Of course, that made him the target of the guardians first attack. Faster than anyone could imagine, the creature slammed its right fist on the ground, barely missing Veil by less than a foot.

Looking at the guardian up close was even more intimidating. At first glance, there seemed to be no weak points or openings. The rocks that composed it fit so tightly that they were almost fused. Slicing through any with a normal weapon was next to impossible. However, this time Dallions increased perception let him see something elseair. Currents enveloped the colossus, in the same fashion that water had kept the well guardian back in Dherma. They were the ones that held the orbiting rocks in the air, creating what looked like a defense grid.

I see the tendons, Dallion shouted.

At least now he knew how to pass through the guardians outer defenses. Target markers appeared all over the colossus, indicating the creatures weak spots, making it tempting for Dallion to shoot a bolt or two at them. However, he resisted. There would be time for that later. At present, they were only here to observe.

The guardian made another series of strikes aimed at squishing Veil. The first few were evaded easily, yet each following became more and more difficult. When it became obvious that Veil wouldnt be able to keep it up, he made a counterattack, slashing at the giant hand with both swords. The attacks didnt do any damage whatsoever.

Several air currents surrounded the hand like an invisible mesh of armor, deflecting any attacks. Even Hannahs sword failed to cut through, having its trajectory changed so as to slide off. Unable to see them, Veil made several more attempts. For the most part they too were unsuccessful, although at one point Hannahs blade managed to find an opening through the mesh, passing through and cutting a sizable chunk of rock from the guardians hand.

MODERATE STRIKE

The guardian shouted in pain, then kicked Veil, sending him flying back.

TERMINAL WOUND

VEILs health has decreased by 100%

A red rectangle appeared, after which Veil disappeared from the realm.

That wasn't the scary part, though. The fact that the guardian could do single hit kills, on the other hand, was.

Dont think about it, Veil shouted. Continue with what youre doing.

The elite threw two knives at the Guardians head. Each was specifically aimed to avoid what could be considered vital points. More impressive, each of the weapons managed to pass through the mesh of air, hitting their targets. The wounds were all minor, but having them occur at all suggested that Veil was doing some heavy-duty combat splitting.

TERMINAL WOUND

GLORIA's health has decreased by 100%

Another red rectangle appeared.

Several more knives made their way to the guardian, hitting him in the shoulder. Enraged, the colossus took a step back. The rocks that floated around him dropped to the ground with a small, as the air currents filled in the gaps in its invisible armor.

If this were a video game, Dallion would say that the enemy had entered its second phase. The issue was that there no longer appeared to be any means of attacking. Veil must have discovered it as well, for he stopped with his attacks, moving back instead.

Its shielded itself, Dallion shouted.

I know. Think of a way to get crushed in a blaze of glory.

Hardly the most encouraging thing to say, but Dallion knew what the man meant. It was time to experiment going through the air shield, or die trying.

The weapon vibrated affirmatively.

Okay, then. Here we go.

Dallion dashed forward. With his lack of athletics there was no point in trying to attempt any fancy jumping, even if through training he had learned a few moves. The main goal was for him to find out whether he could cut his way through the defensive mesh.

Still occupied with Vend, the guardian didn't pay attention to Dallion as he approached. At least that was one thing less for Dallion to worry about.

The closer Dallion got, the better he could see the composition of the mesh. Thousands of miniature air threats weaved together to create the equivalent of a chain mail. Each individual one was thinner than a human finger, yet the sheer number alone was enough to block anything that attempted to pass through.

Dallion summoned his dartbow and fired a bolt. The projectile smacked the mesh head-on. A number of strands got torn in the process, though not enough to let it pass. Instead, the bolt turned around and flew straight at Dallion.

Using his shield, Dallion easily deflected the attack, but the revelation was chilling. Not only could the guardian stop any projectile attack but also could redirect it anywhere afterwards.

Letting go of the dartbow, Dallion held the armadil shield in front of him and kept on running. The shield extended, providing a full semi-sphere of protection. Moments later, the impact took place.

It was less than an impact, rather it felt like running into a wall of jelly. Dallion slowed down, then stopped altogether.

Contract! Dallion shouted, then split into three instances.

As the shield returned to its normal state, Dallion performed three different attacks: a slash along the air threads, a slash perpendicular to them, then a piercing attack.

In all instances the harpsisword cut through the threads like butter. Also, in all instances, the same red rectangle appeared.

TERMINAL WOUND

Your health has decreased by 100%

Moments later Dallion was back in the real world. Looking at Veil and Glorias expression they were too happy with the results either. If anything, only Vend appeared amused.

Thats what we call a trial run, the elite explained. Get used to them. Youll be going through a lot of those when facing serious jobs. So, what did we learn?

That the thing cannot be attacked, Veil grumbled. Reaching it is easy, but fighting it is impossible.

Thats some information, at least. Vend didnt seem all that impressed.

Its air shield can also attack, Gloria added. When I came in contact, there was a wave of simultaneous attacks. Each was minor, but with so many of them it could take us out in one go.

Wave of attacks? Dallion hadnt even noticed. It made sense, though. There was nothing to say that the air currents were restricted to one function. Like chainling tendrils, they could attack and defend. The good thing was that they could only deal damage in immediate proximity. As long as the attackers were a foot away, no harm would come to them.

Its not a shield, Dallion said. Its a mesh of air currents. Thats what keeps the rocks in the air around it. When Vend hit it with his knives, the guardian filled in the gaps. From that point on, its pretty much impervious. He hesitated for a moment. Its possible to cut through them, but not to pass. Also, ranged attacks wont work.

That all? Vend asked.

The trainees looked at each other. However, none of them said a word.

Everything you said is right, but you missed the most obvious. The reason the guardian relies so much on defense is because its weak. All the attacks we did so far dropped its health to sixty percent.

Sixty? Dallion hadn't noticed that. Although he was busy focusing on other things.

Determining the enemy's strength is the key thing when scouting an enemy. Without that we might as well be going on a picnic.

I see. Gloria looked down. Dallion could see she was ashamed by her mistake. Veil, on the other hand, didn't seem affected in the least.

So, what happens now? Dallion asked.

Now? Vend smiled. Now we rest a bit, then we enter the realm again. As I said, this is only the beginning.

Chapter 194: Semi Plan of Action

Combat scouting two simple words that were more exhausting than anyone could imagine. It was one thing to go on a mission without a reward. Every awakened who had mended an item or reached their level cap had gone, experienced that. This was different. The whole point was to gain information in the subtlest of ways in order to use it later. In many aspects it was closer to training, not to mention it was gruellingly difficult. In two hours, the group had engaged in seventy-one attacks. Having the location of the guardian turned out to be quite useful. They didn't have to go about searching for it, heading directly for the spot in question. After the tenth time, the group knew the place by heart. After the twentieth, the guardian didn't bother hiding, but emerged the moment they got near.

Each attack was short, sometimes ten minutes true time, sometimes less. At first, the goal was to see how they could approach the creature as seamlessly as possible. When Vend decided that was enough, there were an array of attempts to see whether they could go through its mesh of air currents. The latter resulted in a number of awakened deaths, some less impressive than others. Ultimately, two things were established: everything awakened that came into contact with the air armor would instantly die, and the only two things that could effectively cut through it were Hannah's sword and Dallion's harpsword.

Funnily enough, getting him by a boulder head on only dealt seventy-five percent damage, which meant they could easily get a rock hit if needed during their attack.

On the positive side, it turned out that Vend was right about the guardian's health. Being a simple level one, it didn't have that much health, meaning they could easily defeat it during their first assault with a series of ranged attacks. The issue was the noble. They weren't allowed to kill it in one blow. All they had been paid to do was get the guardian to a state in which a single attack would finish the job. Because of the full shield, that made things extremely difficult.

After the first fifty attempts, Vend had the group test up by treating them to an awakened feast. Unlike the previous ones, everyone ate in silence, reflecting on everything they had learned. Dallion could see their determination, as well as their doubts. Gloria was concerned she wasn't quick enough to take advantage of the weaknesses in the guardian's mesh she hadn't learned splitting yet, which meant she had to aim at the spots Vend and Dallion shot at.

Veil, on his part, was annoyed that he couldn't deal more damage with the sword he was loaned. The weapon seemed to like him to the point that it had changed its angle slightly during the fight, although even that hadn't proved to be enough.

After the group had had their fill, the scouting continued. New strategies were attempted combining the strengths of all participants, first in pairs, then in groups of three, and finally all four together. When all combos were exhausted and everything considered valuable learned, Vend decided to end the scouting.

Dallion expected theyd have another awakened feast, but instead Dallion had them go to one of the citys lakes. All that was wella serene environment that had more than rocks was a welcome change. The only issue was that the lake in question was dangerously close to Eurys workshop.

This is really stupid, Veil complained. We have to prove we can level it up, right? Cant we just defeat the guardian then have the noble defeat it again? Itll be a piece of cake for him.

I wish. Vend let out a dry laugh.

Well, why not? I know how strong one must be to become a noble. Killing a level one guardian will be as easy as

Its not about skill, Vend interrupted. You havent been around many nobles, have you? Well, technically I suppose you can call your village chiefs nobles of a sort, but they cant compare to the real thing. For a single second resentment vibrated through him before disappearing in the pool of other emotions. Its not that nobles cant do it, its that they dont want to, and they definitely dont want to spend more time with us than they have to.

Talk about snobbishness That was probably the reason why even the general Dallion was forced to deal with, only had limited access to the lower nobility, if that. The way the man had made his fortuneother than inheriting it from his familywas by buying and reselling artifacts. In the eyes of the nobles, people like him were such that at least could be tolerated. In all the time since Dallion had joined the Icepicker guild, not once had he seen a noble visit to get an item improved. He knew that a lot hadnt, but in all cases they would tell one of their servants to drop off and pick up the item for them.

Later this evening, we go pick up the noble, bring the guardian to a vulnerable state, then leave the awakened realm. Thats it.

That didnt sound fun at all.

Any chance the noble might be impressed with our performance and give us a bonus or some sort? Veil persisted.

Unlikely. Chances are that the noble will be polite, maybe nice even, but other than the occasional flattery, thats all youll get. Just do your job well and fast, mostly fast.

Vend, why cant we share markers? Dallion asked. That would help a lot.

Ah. Okay, here we go with some more practical basics. The elite leaned back. The most obvious reason is that were all in different gates. Sure, the blond pair have no problem and are actually doing it quite well, but given that their skills mostly match its really not an advantage in this case. You can only share with awakened of your range or higher, which is useless for me since your markers are too slow. As for me

What if they pass through their gate exam? Dallion asked. Itll take less than an hour. I have enough stashed away.

Fear sprang up in both Veil and Gloria.

Forget it. Vend waved a hand dismissively. They can do that after the jobs done.

But if they do it now, I can help them see

Its never a good idea to pass a gate so early before a task. Awakening trials are serious business. If they weren't, people wouldnt bother with them. Vend gave Dallion a warning glance. The ideas good, but not the timing. Besides, we already have our strategy.

Dallion nodded slowly. During the last assault, Vend had allowed Dallion to engage in a serious attackthe only one during the entire scouting process. The whole point was to see if Dallion could target the guardians weak spotthe tendrils. Given that they were out of air, bolts, daggers, and other projectiles were useless. However, equipped with his harpsisword and using his music skills, Dallion was able to slice the air current that kept the Guardians finger rocks linked to its hand. As a critical wound, the guardians health was reduced by ten percent. That wasnt the goal of the experiment, though. Through it, the group had seen that cutting an air tendon created a gap in the guardians air mesh.

Also, there is one thing that I can teach these two before its time, Vend said with a smile. Nothing that glamorous, but it will double their chances.

There was a long pause. Everyone looked at Vend expectantly.

Splitting, he said with a sigh. Do you even listen to the things I tell you? And people wonder why I dont like doing this crap.

That was amusing considering how much the echo had complained about Dallions bad habits, lack of progress, easygoing nature and everything else beneath the sun. On the other hand, he had helped a lot and shown genuine pride at all of Dallions successes. Of course, it wasnt until Dallion got to master his music vision that he realized that.

Youre going to teach them splitting in a few hours? Dallion narrowed his eyes.

Ill try. Maybe theyll get to do one instance, maybe not, but in every event it will be worth the effort. After passing the second gate this is the next best thing.

Somehow Dallion was doubtful, but didnt argue nonetheless. It was then decided that he would return to explain the situation to Hannah, while Vend went on with the Luors training. As usual, Dallion felt like he had pulled the short straw. Bringing bad news to Hannah was worse than any training he could imagine.

There already were a few people in front of the Gremlins Timepiece by the time Dallion got there. All of them were regulars enjoying a drink outside. The inside was surprisingly empty.

If youre going to make such a big fuss about it, maybe I should get a better cook! a loud yell came from the kitchen.

That explained the lack of people. While occasionally amusing, Hannahs shouting matches with Aspan remained an acquired taste.

The kitchen door slammed open, then shut again, as a very annoyed innkeeper walked into the main room. Even without his skills, Dallion could see she was a powder keg ready to explode.

What? the innkeeper snapped at him the moment they made eye contact.

Problems? Dallion decided to take the roundabout route.

Sometimes Im really fed up with Aspans nonsense. He complains all the time and the moment I make a simple request he anyway thats not for this conversation. What do you need this time?

What makes you think I need anything?

Nope, didnt mess up. On second thought, maybe agreeing to bring her the bad news could be considered messing up. Its just that we got a special request.

Hannah arched a brow.

I mean the guild. Seems we did such a good job mending an area that a city noble wants us to improve it by the end of the day.

If there was a time when Dallion felt tempted to use his music skills on someone, this was it. However, he was too smart to attempt to. This wasnt a stall seller he could sweet talk. When it came to the innkeeper, playing with fire was a certain way to end up without a room.

To his surprise, the anger ringing throughout her quickly dissipated.

You got a city leveling job? she asked, impressed.

I think so? Dallion smiled. To be honest, Im not sure about the whole thing. Vend said its a big deal and something that is unlikely the guild will ever get again, so Ive been volunteered to participate in it.

I see. The innkeeper nodded. And I expect Gloria and Veil have been volunteered as well?

Im afraid so

Well, theres nothing that can be done. Hannah shrugged. To Dallions astonishment, not only wasnt she mad, but she was rather glad by the fact. At least itll give Aspan fewer reasons to complain. Hear that? she shouted in the direction of the kitchen door. No feasts tonight! Only drinks!

A shout back indicated that the cook was also pleased with the development in his own way.

And get some food for Dal! Hannah shouted. Hell be seeing some bigwigs, so he needs to be at his best.

Chapter 195: Talk with a Shield

The interior was different from what Dallion remembered. It wasn't a matter of a new coat of paint or the odd furniture addition here and there. The entire space seemed completely changed to mimic the Gremlins Timepiece, provided the inn was made exclusively out of wood.

So, we meet again at last, the dryad said.

His attire was also new, presenting the local alternative of skinny jeans and vintage t-shirts. If this were a movie, it would definitely be in the eighties. The only thing missing was the absurd hairdo, but somehow Dallion suspected that the dryad could even pull that off.

You've changed the place, Dallion said. It sounded cheesy, but this was the only way he could react for the moment.

Of course it is. That's what companion gear is supposed to do: make its owners, or future owners, feel welcome. And I must say that I'm better at it than most. It all goes down to being a dryad. Some guardians simply don't have the inborn talent. Not to speak bad of the nymphs, but combat is their thing.

I didn't know.

Ah. The dryad shrugged. Things tend to vanish down the sewers of history after a while. Anyway, shall we go up?

Dallion felt slightly conflicted. There was no reason for him to refuse. In fact, quite the opposite. The entire shield realm was calling out for him to leave his worries and relax for a bit. The issue was that in most cases when Dallion had been made such an offer, the consequences were less than positive.

Dal. The dryad's expression remained warm, but his voice had suddenly hardened. As much as I enjoy the occasional visit, I know you didn't come here to discuss interior design. Something is weighing on your mind, and it isn't something you want to share with the rest of your guardians.

Is it about love triangles? The dryad prodded. Professional disagreements? Forging problems?

You're pretty good, aren't you? Dallion sighed.

As I said

You're a companion gear, Dallion finished the sentence for him. Fine, let's get this over with.

The two went up a wooden stairwell until they reached the top floor of the realm. If Dallion was impressed with the changes before, now he was astonished. The entire floor was transformed into an indoor garden in the most remarkable way, including several large windows with a view of a perfectly blue sky.

The dryad led on to a small wooden table in the far side of the room, where he sat down. Dallion soon followed.

So? The dryad began. What shall we talk about?

There were several things on Dallions mind. Most were involved with Euryhis concern whether she was okay, her reaction to Gloria staying at the inn with Dallion, her reaction to Dallion taking Vend as a mentor, while also promising to become her apprentice

The war thirty years ago. In the end, Dallion went on to his other pressing topic. What can you tell me about that?

Thats a bit vague, you know. The guardian mused. There were quite a few wars thirty years ago. And no, I wasnt in all of them, but guardians talk and so do their owners. What exactly do you want to know?

I want to know what happened during the Wars of Inheritance.

Wow. The dryad whistled. You really dont beat about the bush. A lot of things were said, and as usual this is a matter on which there are many sides. The simple version is, there was a power vacuum, and it got filled. Some people took advantage, some didnt, some tried to take advantage, but failed.

Were chainlings used in battle?

The question caused the guardian to pause, creating its own bubble of silence in the room. Dallion could see how the emotions that filled every part of the furniture flickered off in succession, one by one, like lightbulbs down a corridor.

Youre asking things I cannot answer. The dryads reaction was measured. Since youre doing it now, I can speculate that it has to do with your upcoming mission with the noble?

Speculate more, Dallion whispered. If this was how the game had to be played, so be it.

Given that its only been three decades, its quite possible that the noble might have participated in the war in question. A lot of things have changed since my time, but nobles arent one of them. The ones who deal with lesser tasks are usually those who are young and eager to get a taste of the world, or those too old to be of any significance. Think of it as that annoying great uncle that used to be a big deal a century ago, but no longer gets invited to the really important parties.

That wasnt good. If the noble was some geezer whod been in the war, there was every chance they might recognize the members of the party. For one thing, even if Dallion looked different from his grandfather at the time, it would be difficult to explain away the Luors pure blond hair.

Still, I wouldnt be too worried. Unless you pose a significant threat, they are unlikely to pay any attention. From their point of view, every second they could spend less with the likes of you the better for them.

And if Im a threat?

The dryad hummed, then stretched his arms upwards.

If I can speculate more I don't think there's any reason for you to worry about war toys. Let's just say I've seen a lot of nasty things during the wars the serious wars. There was a ripple of pain, almost concealed among the other emotions. Nobles don't often hold grudges against that. Of course, it's all very case by case, but I wouldn't think anyone who had the power to use something nasty in battle should be concerned. It's the Order's job to hunt those things down, and for all their appearances, nobles don't like to deal with the Order.

Is there a reason for this?

Back when the archduke's envoy had arrived in Dallion's village, she had a quite powerful cleric under her command. While the soldiers avoided him like the plague, the cleric seemed to obey the Dames orders to the letter.

The usual power, dominance, philosophical disagreements. The dryad shrugged. Take your pick. Need me to speculate about anything else, or is that enough for you?

It's fine for now. The answers Dallion had gotten were good, but they had nothing to do with the questions he wanted answered. The truth was, he still felt ashamed asking the trivial relationship questions, even to someone whose job for millennia was to know about those things.

Maybe once the job is over

, Dallion told himself as he stood up.

Thanks for the chat, shield. It helped a lot.

Always a pleasure. The guardian bowed, still seated. It's what I do. If you really want to thank me, you know what you need to do.

Yes, I'll keep it in mind. Dallion started his way to the staircase.

Oh, one more thing, the dryad said, just as Dallion was about to start his descent down. Not a speculation, just a piece of advice. Never use splitting to solve your love problems. It never ends well.

A split second later, Dallion was back at the guildhall's lobby the spot Vend had decided to be the meeting place before the job. Of course, decided was a free interrelation of the definition. Dallion had learned about it less than ten minutes ago from Nil, who had learned it from Adzorg, who had been told in passing by Vend. It seemed that even in a fantasy world, instant communications had found a way to make people lazy.

Dallion quickly removed the blocker ring from his finger and returned it to his coin pouch. Only a second had passed during which time he had had it on, but for a guardian that second could well stretch into infinity.

Relax. Just because these things are rare, it doesnt mean theyre harmful. Think of it as gold. Gold is rare, but it wont kill you.

It was still weird getting encouragement from himself, even if he had started to view them more like twin siblings of the original than actual copies. Despite being identical in so many aspects, echoes had their one unique behavior distinguishing them from each other and their creators.

Dallion. Estezols familiar voice filled the lobby. You need to go to training room seven.

Sure thing, Dallion replied.

There was quite a crowd in the training rooms. It was always amusing how a group of people would enter one, then leave almost instantly, only to be replaced by the next. In terms of true time, hours, maybe even weeks, had passed, but from an observer in the real world it was as if the place was full with very picky customers.

Training room seven was the exception. A middle-aged woman was there already someone Dallion had never seen, as well as a lot of fabrics and sewing materials.

Hi, the woman said without introducing herself. Please hold your arms sideways for a moment.

Err, okay. Dallion complied.

The woman then quickly proceeded to do a series of measurements, like a tailor. Dallion had gotten enough clothes done by Eury to know what was going on, although he still couldnt find any explanation for why it was happening here.

Youve no idea whats going on, do you? the woman asked with a polite smile.

No, not really.

As someone should have explained, nobles are quite picky, and since there isnt any time for you to go shopping before the meeting, Im here to make you something to wear. My name is Mory, by the way. Im one of the guilds elite crafters.

A crafter? This was the third time Dallion had actually seen one up close. For the most part crafters kept to themselves, going so far as to being in a separate section of the building. Dallion knew that they were responsible for combat gear and equipment, although to be honest, he still wasnt exactly clear what that entailed, since everyone hed been with appeared to have bought their own weapons.

Ive already finished with the other two, so I have the basic design pinned down. Any variation you want to add, or do you leave that to me?

The clothes I have are with thread armor, Dallion tried to protest.

And a wonderful job, too, but the nobles tastes are a bit more refined. You'll have to be without armor on this one. Not that it'll be an issue from what Vend told me.

Dallion could only grumble. That was another detail that his mentor had forgotten to mention. It was starting to turn into a habit. Then again, this seemed the way of this world.

I leave it to you. Something that would suit me.

Okay the woman continued measuring. Remove your gear for a moment. I'll have to make something for them as well she looked at Dallion's boots. The boots can stay. They are exotic enough to pass.

After a few more seconds, the woman stepped back and started going through the fabrics gathered there. Looking at her, one would assume her to be a kind old lady from a Victorian novel. Using his music skills, though, Dallion could see that she was much more than that. The woman was dedicated to her craft to the point she was unwilling to forgive anyone who would harm her creations.

Dallion swallowed. Apparently, artists were very different from what they were back on Earth. Combine that with the ability to fight and Dallion wondered whether he wouldn't have to face living clothes at some point in the near future.

No need to worry, kiddo. The woman let out a warm laugh. This is not the first mission I save. I used to assist in a noble's house at one point.

Oh? What happened? Dallion let curiosity get the better of him.

The usual. The noble I was serving decided to go to the capital, so the lesser staff were let go. There was no regret in her as she spoke. Everything was matter-of-fact. I pity, but then again, that's why the city has guilds. She took out a small sample of silvery fabric, then looked at Dallion again. I think you'll look fine in silver. Just one thing to keep in mind. It heats up close to fires, so don't stand near any torches.

Thanks, I'll try to remember that. Already he was feeling he was about to go somewhere where he didn't belong.

Chapter 196: Lady Marigold

There were a lot of things that sounded wonderful in theory. Being dressed entirely in gold, or silver, was one of them. Dallion had often wondered why such clothes weren't as popular, given the wealth of some of the people in Nerosal. After all, the general had an entire room of gold sand that served no apparent purpose. When it came to clothes, though, gold was avoided, despite there being rolls of fabrics of it sold. Even Eury had diluted the gold strands in the clothes she had made him with other fabrics.

Now that Dallion was wearing the most magnificent outfit he had ever seen, made entirely out of silver, he understood why. It took considerable effort on his part not to rip it off and throw it away in disgust. After a few minutes, it felt like the equivalent of wearing a radiator in summer. Mory had assured him it wouldn't get any worse, especially after sunset, though that didn't make things better. And, of course, there could only be an extremely thin internal layer of cloth inside, because the noble would spot if there wasn't.

That aside, the craftsmanship was remarkable. Mory had aged the threads, making sure that Dallion didnt like wearing a bad Halloween costume of tin foil. His vest and trousers were vintage dark while the shirt with actual silver buttons was several shades lighter. The new harp sword and dagger sheaths, along with the shield ornaments were bright as expected and equally uncomfortable to Dallions guardians. The aramdil shield was outright unimpressed, going on the closest thing to a tirade Dallion had heard about dwarf forging skills and the ways they could turn metal into anything, including pillow fluff.

After another ten minutes of final adjustments, Dallion was taken back to the lobby, where the rest of the group were waiting. The thing was that they werent the only ones there.

Looking good, Dal. Someone stifled a laugh.

Half the guild had gathered with the sole purpose of getting a good laugh. Dallion could see amusement ringing through them, like a chorus of bells. He wasnt the only one in that situation, though. Luor and Gloria were also dressed in a set of clothes that were just as uncomfortable as Dallions. The only difference was that the metal Mory had chosen for them was copper.

The prize, however, went to Vend. The elite was well groomed, dressed in a multi-layered custom suit that combined lace, three sets of metals and enough ornaments to make muggers have second thoughts about robbing him out of fear they would be mugged as a result.

Its not my first time, Vend said, seeing Dallions reaction. At some point its just better to have a set of clothes on hand. Anyway, ready to go?

Is it too late to say no? Dallion asked semi-jokingly.

The answer was obvious.

Initially, Dallion expected the noble to send a carriage to get them to the noble in question. As it turned out, those things only worked in reverse. The group was expected to talk to the estate, where a carriage would take them and the noble to the Stone Garden. The only relief was the knowledge that no one would dare mess with them when in such clothes no one in their right mind would risk annoying a city noble.

Any of you know the proper etiquette? Vend asked as the group walked through the city roads. Seeing them, crowds of people were already starting to gather.

Now Dallion understood why Hannah wasnt too upset. Having it be known that her inns awakened were assisting a city noble with something was a sure way to increase her customer base.

Im familiar with the basics, Veil said with a note of pride.

Ignore them, Vend quickly said. Another practical lesson. Were not going there to be their equals. Were commoners, so we have to remain polite commoners.

Bow, spoke when spoken to, that sort of thing? Dallion asked.

Close enough. Ill do the talking, although depending on who we get they might chat a bit with the pair over here. Vend glanced at the Luors. Most important thing. Dont flatter them, dont try to kiss ass, and dont lie. Their perception is much higher than ours, and they hate that sort of thing. Polite, but honest, got it?

Dallion nodded. On the surface, this sounded rather good. Not having to kiss up to some snobby noble was a welcome difference from Earth. However, the way Vend said it suggested there was a bit more to it.

They made their way through the normal parts of the into a place where a large stone wall emerged, similar in shape and thickness to the outer city walls. There were a set of guards there, and similar to the ones on the outer city gates, they didnt care one bit that a bunch of people in expensive clothes went inside.

Apparently knowing that they were protecting deities tended to make people slack off. Of course, it also meant that if someone was strong enough to kill the nobles they were protecting, they wouldnt do it in sneaky fashion.

The buildings inside the gate seemed remarkably simplistic, common almost. True, they were largert hough not higher than most Dallion had already seen, and far less well kept. In several instances, Dallion managed to see cracks on a wall here and there.

People probably wont, but when youre a noble, what does it matter? When you can turn tin to gold, having something that cannot be changed is considered far more special.

Why not just build their houses out of special materials?

Imperial decree. That is reserved only for the imperial family.

Dont stare, Vend whispered.

Is it rude? Dallion asked out of habit.

No. I dont want to listen to the history of a building dressed like this.

The building they were supposed to get to would have been considered extremely nice back on Earth, though here, Dallion had to exert his force of will not to enter the realm and repair it. Similar to an English manor, it had over hundred windows and three main entrances. Naturally, Vend led the group to the backdoor.

Polite and honest, he repeated, and knocked on the door.

Within seconds the door swung open, revealing an incredibly large person that would even give Grunt a run for his money. Giving Vend a clear look reserved for a servant who disapproved of the guests their noble had invited. Without saying a single word, the man made it very clear that none of the group were welcomed. It was an impressive talent, only overshadowed by the true disgust the man held towards them. Dallion could see it as bright as day, just as he could see the unusual amount of envy the giant held towards Vend.

Wait here, the servant grumbled, then gently closed the door.

His job is not to like you, dear boy. Servants are generally children of a family under a nobles employment that dont have the skill or courage to do anything else. Most havent even become double digits.

That made sense. There was no point to take the risk if they werent going to do anything with the newfound powers.

How long does the waiting last? Gloria asked. Back in the day, it was her family that played such games, so she knew the deal quite well.

Not long, Vend replied. Theres betting involved, so no one would want to be accused of cheating.

Thats dumb, Veil scoffed. Its not like an hour or two will change anything in terms of the bet. Grandpa used to

Dal? a familiar voice asked a short distance away. What are you doing here?

To Dallions great surprise, across the small garden separating manors, none other than Falkner was standing, saber in hand. His clothes were very different from what he wore in the guild. On the surface they appeared quite simpler, but with Dallions perception he could see the amount of special metal threads woven within. What was more, there was a coat of arms embroidered on his shirt.

Falkner? Dallion was just as surprised.

Were here on a job, your grace, Vend quickly stepped in. Apologies for not informing you.

The moment of confusion quickly disappeared. Before Dallions very eyes, Falkner changed from the cheerful confused boy to an icy noble whose family ruled cities.

Its quite alright. I've only been a guest here for a short while. His glance moved from Vend to the Luors. Who are those?

New recruits, your grace, Vend replied with the same calm he always had. Clearly this wasnt the first time something of the sort had happened. Theyre village nobles and friends of Dals.

There was a moment of silence, though not to Dallion. What the boy didnt say Dallions music skills helped see a level of infatuation he hadnt seen since middle school.

Pure blonds? Falkner managed to say.

Before things could get any more awkward, the mansion backdoor opened again. Falkner immediately took the opportunity to walk away, pretending that he didnt know Vend and the others, and the group discretely redirected their attention to their assisting noble.

Is that them? an old female voice asked.

Without a doubt, the person was very different from what Dallion expected. When the dryad guardian had said that it was likely they would send a less relevant member of the city lords family, Dallion had expected someone of the approximate age of his grandfather. Instead, he was looking at a woman who was pushing a hundred.

Yes, Lady Marigold, the servant said immediately. Members of the Icepicker

Ah, if it isnt little Vend. The woman swung her cane, interrupting her servant with a sizable push. Despite her appearance she remained a noble, which also meant that she likely had more points on body than the servants combined.

Always a pleasure to see you, Milady, Vend bowed, and to Dallions surprise actually meant it. I was unaware that you had an interest in such mundane activities.

With everyone fussing over this stupid celebration, any excuse to get out of the house is welcome. Slowly, she made her way out into the open. Also, I bet a small sum when I heard you were involved.

Of course, Milady. The elite smiled.

So, who have you brought with you? she turned to get a better look at the rest.

Dallion knew this whole time that the old woman routine was pretty much an act, and still he found himself acting as if it wasnt, bending down, so she could get a better look at him.

All fresh rookies from the wilderness, Vend explained. As far as I know they come from a village called

Arent you a sweet one? The woman pinched Veil by the cheek.

Dallion felt for his friends. This was one fight he could do nothing but lose.

And pure blond too, Lady Marigold went on. My niece married a pure blond in the capital. Lovely boy. Although not as cute as you. You say youre a village chief?

Still havent caught on? Shes not asking because she doesnt know, shes asking to make polite conversation. Nobles make a point to know as much as possible about everything they get involved with. Everything and everyone.

Yes, Milady, Veil replied with a stiff expression. One day more.

And ambitious. Everyone loves a boy with ambition. Well, maybe except his sister, the woman turned to Gloria. Keeping him in check, I hope?

Lady Marigold, the servant interrupted, despite the fear that resonated throughout his very being. Your carriage is here. Would you

Who needs a carriage when Vend is with us? The woman raised her cane slightly, causing the large man to brace himself. Thankfully, this time, nothing followed. Isnt that so, Vend?

Walking wouldnt be my first choice, Milady. Not with a bet involved.

Thoughtful as always. I keep telling my ungrateful grandson to send more artifacts your way, but he seems to be obsessed with the big five. Its this new fad. Back in my day we were happy to get the

thing cleared. Now, it must come with a certificate saying which guild cleared it. Absolute nonsense, if you ask me. The woman cleared her throat. Very well. Get the wagon here. We have a garden to improve.

Chapter 197: The Real Thing

Thats a very nice harpsisword you have there, Lady Marigold noted as the group rode in the carriage.

It was an incredibly large carriage, more spacious and luxurious on the inside than an Earth limousine. What was more, there was a selection of expensive liquors near the nobles seat, along with what appeared to be a belt of metal badges. From what Nil had said, those were opera plays performed by echoes. It was amusing to see that nobles went around with their own collection of songs and movies. One probably cost more than the entire Icepicker guild could make in a week.

I was very lucky to get it, Milady, Dallion replied. Would you like to he hesitated. Would the offer be viewed as a threat?

Dont be so tense. What would an old woman do with a weapon like that? the woman asked, genuinely amused. I take it, you're skilled enough to play it?

Only in the awakened realms, Milady.

Oh, thats a pity. Back when I was a girl, there were real harpsisword operas at the imperial court. The performance would play, sing, dance, and fight all in one with magnificent precision. Nowadays itd be lucky to see a play that has only two of those activities, and even luckier if they do them well.

Dallion swallowed.

Who did you buy it off? I havent seen that type in quite a while.

To be honest, I dont know, Milady. The person who sold it to me disappeared along with his shop a few days after I got it.

There was no need to add details. The more details the more suspicious was Dallion making this seem. Sadly, it seemed that it was already too late. A faint note of curiosity flickered within the noble. Without warning or request, she reached towards the sheathed weapon. Before her fingers could touch it, three of the strings of the harpsisword vibrated.

Lady Marigold instantly stopped.

Protective girl, isnt she? the woman asked.

Apologies, Milady, Vend intervened again. Hes still figuring things out.

For once, the noble didnt have anything to add. Instead, she kept glancing at the weapon for a while longer, before pouring herself a glass of extremely fragrant cherry alcohol.

As far as Dallion could tell, there was no change in the nobles emotions, but he knew that not to be true. She had visibly reacted to the harpsiswords vibrations. Several seconds later, the weapons strings went still.

But what happened?

Your guardian reacted to a noble.

I think I got that, but why? What would make

Your guardian doesn't accept Lady Marigold as her noble. To simplify it for you, your harpsisword chose you over her.

No one attempted to start a conversation during fifteen minutes it took the carriage to reach the Stone Garden. Once there, Vend was the only one to step out. Holding the lady's hand, he set foot in the garden.

Time to go, Vend said to the rest of the group.

Getting the hint, Veil, Gloria, and Dallion reach out, grabbing hold of his forearm.

AREA AWAKENING

The familiar landscape of stones and pillars surrounded them. For a split second Dallion wondered if he wouldn't see an entirely different aspect of the noble—probably her, as she was in her thirties, or younger. Anticlimactically, the woman was just as she was before, even to her clothes. No weapons, shields, or pieces of armor were attached to her, almost as if she weren't here to fight, but just on a brief vacation.

So, this is the garden from the inside? The noble looked around. Dreadful place. I still don't understand why my nephew likes it so much. If it were up to me, I wouldn't improve the place, I'd have it transformed into something useful.

Maybe next year he will, milady, Vend said.

Oh, Vend. The woman shook her head. That's one of the things I like about you. Always so certain about uncertainties. Come along then, let's get this done.

The location is twenty minutes away, milady. How do you want us to do it?

Carry on as usual. I'll follow you up to the danger area, then let you do your thing.

The danger area is a bit bigger here, Lady Marigold, Vend clarified.

Ah. The projecting rocks. The woman nodded. In that case, I'll have to take a bit of a risk, won't I? The familiar smile returned to her face. Just don't take too long.

We'll do our best, milady.

The group set off forward, while the noble remained deliberately behind. At first Dallion would turn around every few seconds to make sure that the lady was well and within distance, but he soon gave up. Seeing the old woman at exactly the same distance, no matter whether they doubled the pace or slowed down, felt unnerving.

Same plan? Dallion asked.

Unless something goes wrong. Vend nodded. You take out an arm, then we do the rest from a distance.

Earlier the plan had sounded quite solid. Now that they had to do it for real, many were starting to have doubts. Veil, who had been reduced to a taunter, didn't look at all pleased. Even he had to agree, though, that the role was perfect for him. During all the scouting battles, he was the one who kept fighting furiously at close range, and the guardian would have remembered that.

COMBAT INITIATED

The colossus emerged from the ground as expected. Used to them, it didn't waste time throwing as many heavy boulders as it could in their direction. The rate was slightly more aggressive than before, but not so much to require a change in strategy.

He's a big one, isn't he? Lady Marigold said, safely out of the guardians range. A few smaller pebbles rolled towards her, stopping a foot away.

Vend didn't respond, slowing his pace of running slightly so Veil would take the lead.

Get ready, the elite shouted to Dallion.

The pressure continued building up, greater than anything Dallion had felt. Even when fighting for his actual life, he still allowed himself a hint of recklessness. Being watched by the Lady, though, made him feel as if he were back in elementary school during test day with an education inspector there. It was always said that the visitor was only there to observe, and it was just a day like any other. All the children knew it wasn't and, in more cases than not, that made them tense up.

Dallion blinked. From the side, his humour was really crappy, but it did the job. Gripping the hilt of his harpsisword, he played a chord.

Slowness emanated from the weapon. Several seconds were needed to match the vibrations of the guardian, but finally Dallion saw his efforts pay off as a speck of sand of slowness attacked itself to the overall mass. It was by no means a lot, but it was a start and something he could build on.

Charge! Veil shouted, giving the go-ahead sight for the rest.

Gloria and Vend went to one side. From here on, they would be responsible for chipping off what health they could after Dallion was done. Focusing as much as he could, Dallion split into five instances. All five easily reached the mountain of stone unimpeded, largely thanks to Veil's actions. Once there, one of the instances fell back, while the other four attempted a series of different attacks.

In each case, the goal was the same: cut through the mesh while it was flimsy and then slice off the tendon before getting the terminal damage. Four instances performed their attacks, slicing the protective layer of air currents. The mesh pattern suddenly shifted, killing off three of them on the spot. The fourth managed to create an opening, but was also killed before making it through.

This was what happened when attack strategies weren't tested out. Back on Earth, Dallion had seen enough boss-instance raids to know what would bring to disaster. Even with the best team, it was next to impossible to do a world first kill on the first go.

Playing a chord of calm and warmth, Dallion did a series of cone slashes, attempting to cut a hole through. His hope was that the music would act as a local anaesthetic, preventing the guardian from noticing him meddling with its defences. To his relief, the attempt succeeded.

The blade cut through the outer layer of the mesh with each, then continued the motion, carving a hole further in. Two layers of air disappeared, then three, then four, finally allowing him the space to pass through.

Shield, cocoon me, Dallion whispered as he pulled back his sword, rolling into a ball mid-air.

The shield obeyed on the instant, its dimensions matching the size of the opening.

Instantly a force shoved Dallion forward. There was no resistance. A second later, the shield returned to its normal state. Dallion had gone through the guardian's defensive perimeter.

It is to a degree. In any event, its close enough.

No red rectangles had appeared, which was good. It meant that the guardian hadn't noticed the breach. All Dallion had to do now was cut off a tendon and

Dallion glanced over his shoulder. The hold that he had made moments ago was completely gone. That just made things a whole lot more complicated. It wasn't a matter of Dallion being trapped; the plan didn't involve him surviving either way. What the plan did rely on, though, was there being a way for the noble to reach the guardian for the final kill, and if the defensive mesh could repair itself for lack of a better word, that became an impossibility. Worse of all, there was no way to tip Vend and the rest off without attracting the attention of the guardian.

Scenarios started playing out in Dallion's mind. Sadly, all of them were pretty much the same. At his level of mind, and under pressure, he couldn't come up with anything worthwhile in that amount of time. The only choice was to go on with the plan.

A targeting marker appeared just above the giant's shoulder. Dallion gritted his teeth.

Meow?

Sorry, buddy, but I don't want you to be seen on this one. I'll find you a scratchy toy to play with later.

With a chirp, the firebird landed on Dallions back and propelled him forward. Since it took care of all the navigation, Dallion only had to worry about getting the strike right. Gritting his teeth, he split into two instances. Both reached the spot at the precisely same time and hit the target with one precise chopping strike.

CRITICAL WOUND

Dealt Damage is increased by 200%

ARM SEVERED

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

The air tendon snapped like a piece of rope, letting boulders crash down to the ground. The guardian roared in pain, grabbing its shoulder with its right arm. As it did, it inadvertently crushed one of Dallions instances out of existence. From this point on, the stakes were real. Dallion didnt have the mental strength to think of more instances.

As expected, the wound had caused the guardians health to drop down to forty percent. From here, even a series of daggers would be enough to finish it off. If Dallion wanted, he could end it all now, with a well-targeted strike to the left legs tendon. Unfortunately, that was out of the question.

The mesh restores itself! Dallion shouted. If its anything more than a cut, it

Before he could finish,two things happened simultaneously. The wind currents around the guardian changed, filing in all gaps as they created the perfect defense. This time, though, it wasnt only the surrounding ones that did. The forces that held rocks together shifted, causing the mountain to crumble to the ground like a pile of rubble. A split second later, they reassembled, creating something completely new.

Stone scorpion! Vend shouted. Everyone, get back! Protect the noble!

Chapter 198: Flight and Combat

Shards of granite split the air, moving faster than the defense markers could keep up. Vend and Gloria had immediately dashed to Lady Marigolds position, using their guard skills to block and deflect any possible threat. Veil remained in close proximity to the guardian, trying unsuccessfully to attract its attention once more. His attempts were strongly hindered by the air mesh that had thickened to the point that even Hannahs sword had trouble cutting through.

Meanwhile, amid all of this chaos, Dallion floated in the air, a few feet above the scorpions body, thanks to his firebird familiar.

Somehow Dallion didnt think that was good at all. Thankfully, the Lady seemed amused, remaining in place almost on purpose while two people were exerting their defense skills to keep her safe. The

absurd thing was that the noble was the most protected person in this realm. If she wanted, she could destroy every creature and awakened in the realm within seconds and everyone knew it.

The scorpions tail kept making stinging motions, each time launching a rock shard at its target like a catapult. The interesting part was that the protective mesh simply let the rock pass through without visually changing. In Dallions mind, that meant several things: either the air currents were directional, made to let things pass from inside out unimpeded a rather unlikely scenario or the guardian weakened an entire area of its protection at the right moment to let them through.

Thats because, unlike you, the boy did a lot of cleaning when he joined the guild. It takes skill and effort to become an elite at a young age. You can normally find stone scorpions near rivers or sewers. They arent usually this big, but their behavior is pretty much the same. Instead of poison, they launch rocks at you. Some of the especially annoying varieties shoot poison rocks.

And they arent guardians?

Apparently, they can become one, although I suppose this is a case of this guardian being innovative.

Any chance hell consider surrendering?

That made a lot of sense. If someone managed to get enough domain guardians under their control, they could effectively steal control from the city lord, at least temporarily. If so, that meant that Dallion still had a claim to his village of Dherma, thanks to the well.

What about it?

How is it connected to the guardian? I dont see any links.

Dallion looked around. There didnt seem to be major currents connecting any part of the scorpion to its protective air shield. Convinced there was more to it, he didnt give up, focusing his music skills on every inch of the rock creature.

Lux, get me up. Just not too close to the mesh, okay?

The firebird obeyed. Soon Dallion could see the entire guardian beneath him. A single set of emotions went through every rock from the tip of the tail to the legs. There, however, Dallion spotted something else air tendrils spreading along the ground.

Initially, he had thought that to be part of the guardians protection, ensuring that it couldnt be attacked from above or below. Thinking further, he found a more logical explanation that was the means through which the guardian extended its air currents to form the mesh. Looking from the outside, such a detail wouldnt be seen. Even on the inside it was difficult to be noticed, but now that Dallion had, it made all the sense in the world.

Does that mean if I chop off its legs, itll transform again?

Everything is possible, although at this stage Id say its rather doubtful. Getting its health reduced too much will make the guardian more cautious. The only thing to be careful about is not to kill it off. Severing a limb or targeting a tendon might prove fatal.

TERMINAL WOUND

GLORIA's health has decreased by 100%

The red rectangle mercilessly let Dallion know that he didnt have time to hesitate. One of the rock shards had gone through her block, killing her on the spot. Seeing that, Veil quickly stopped his attack attempts, rushing back to support Vend. While having no guard skills of his own, the blond knew that he could at least serve as a flesh shield for one go.

Giving up meant that the bet would be lost and the guild would most likely get nothing out of their efforts. On the other hand, it was better than getting the city lord upset with an unexpected area improvement. Or was it?

Dallion took a deep breath, then recited the names of the Moons.

The firebird chirped. Moments later, Dallion shot down. If nothing else, Lux didnt believe in half measures. In a matter of seconds, Dallion was right where he wanted to be. With one strike of his dagger, he created a crack at the very end of the scorpions rear left leg. The creature writhed in pain, as one of the eight air tendrils connecting it to its air mesh disappeared. Thankfully, only a minor wound red marker appeared. Apparently, using crackling methods wasnt as harsh on the guardians overall health. That was good. It also meant that the creature could withstand six more attacks of that nature. Everything considered, Dallion would be happy if he managed four.

Forward, Lux! Dallion shouted. Lets get the other legs!

TERMINAL WOUND

VEILs health has decreased by 100%

Flying over the next leg in the sequence, Dallion performed another slash attack. Still confused by the first attack, the Guardian had remained static, allowing a second air tendril to be severed. However, thats where things became complicated. The massive stone body turned around, in an attempt to get Dallion with its pincer. It wasnt the attack that worried Dallion, however. Rather, it was the shifting position of the remaining two legs of the side. Still, the firebird had caught on to the plan and moved him close enough to manage another successful attack.

Already it should be easy for Vend to throw a knife through the weakened side of the air mesh, but Dallion wanted more.

Two more legs, he told himself. As long as he got the front to legs dealt with, then he might as well let the guardian snip him in two.

Forcing what concentration he had, Dallion split into two instances and directed Lux towards the front left leg. One instance got swatted out of the air by a pincer blow, ending the attempt. The other, thankfully, managed to avoid it by the hair, allowing Dallion to reach his target.

A double slash with a spin and half of the deed was done.

TERMINAL WOUND

Your health has decreased by 100%

Suddenly Dallion was back in the carriage, along with everyone else. Confused, he looked from person to person. Gloria and Veil were just as eager as him, turning towards the guild elite, in the hopes to learn the jobs final outcome.

The answer became obvious moments later, when everyone noted that the stones in the garden had acquired a faint green fluorescent glow.

Damn it, Vend, Lady Marigold said in mock anger. If I knew your team was this good, Id have put more money on this.

Life is the thrill of the uncertain, milady, Vend said, letting go of her hand. Would you like to admire your handiwork?

No. This is enough excitement for one day. I guess Ill just go to see the faces of all those who bet against you.

Her tone was casual, but everyone knew this was an invitation for them to get off the carriage, which they immediately did.

With as little as a general thank you, the carriage drove off. Leaving a very speechless group behind. Vend seemed relieved to be over. Mostly because he didnt like dressing for such occasions.

Gloria, Veil, and Dallion, on the other hand, still had no idea what had fully happened. And while Dallion was used to getting killed before the end of a job, the Luors weren't.

We did the job, Vend said with a sigh, seeing their confusion. That means we can go to the guildhall to get changed. Money will be available in a few days, I think. It's always complicated with city jobs.

No one said a word.

What? Vend crossed his arms.

I got an achievement, Veil broke the silence. Unsure what to say, he started with the only thing he knew for a fact to have happened. Noble sacrifice. He didn't sound overly happy about it.

A pun achievement. Well done. Fiver?

Veil nodded.

What happened in the end? Dallion asked the question on everyone's mind.

Well, after you cut off the air currents to half the mesh, I managed to find a few holes and throw some daggers through. Lady Marigold was convinced that I could kill the creature if I wanted to, so told me it was enough. I then let one of the shards hit me.

He was lying. Normally Dallion wouldn't have noticed, but having a perception of sixteen let him see the momentary twitch in the corner of Vend's mouth.

Why green? Gloria asked, picking up a pebble.

Because she could. Vend replied. Let's get out of here.

You go, Dallion said. I have something I must do.

What? Veil asked. Do you have a date or something?

The question made Gloria immediately redirect her attention to Dallion.

Sure. You're not getting paid extra, remember. The elite looked at him.

The explanation seemed to put Gloria's mind at ease. At the same time, it made Dallion feel worse. There were going to be problems once Eury returned, and he had no idea how he would handle them.

I know. I just don't think we should leave the place messy. Maybe it's because it's my first area, but I don't know. It doesn't feel right.

Hey, I understand, Veil put his hand on Dallion's shoulder. Was the same for me first time I leveled up Dherma. It makes you feel part of the world, as if you're part of something larger.

Yeah, Dallion lied. In his case, he simply didn't feel it was right, leaving cracklings in a perfectly good area. Also, he wanted to check on the guardian.

Knock yourself out. Vend shrugged. Im taking these two to the guildhall. Just be careful not to rip the clothes. If you do, someone will be really pissed off and I wont be saving you from her wrath.

Chapter 199: Cracks and Priorities

The leveling up had changed the garden realm quite a bit. Emerald green pebbles covered the ground like an alien meadow while pillars of white rocks rose to the sky. Whatever sort of improvement this was, it wasnt one that Dallion had seen before.

According to the initial rectangles, the level of the garden had suddenly jumped to five. That meant four improvements by a noble with a single action.

Becoming a noble was more than a carefully controlled clubit was proof of someones power. Thats why all existing members were so careful who they allowed to proceed with the necessary steps; it was also the reason Dallions grandfather had jumped at the opportunity three decades ago. If it took a war to allow the mere possibility for a commoner to join the nobles ranks, the requirements had to be pretty serious indeed.

Nox, get out here, Dallion said.

The crackling leapt into existence, landing a few feet ahead on the green pebbles.

Feel any of them?

Meow! Nox walked along the pebbles, then started running. His ability to sense cracklings had increased considerably since his own level up.

Dallion waited for a few moments, then followed his familiar.

Maybe later. I prefer to walk for a bit.

I honestly cannot figure you out, dear boy. Youre a real oxymoron of life.

That didnt sound too much of a compliment, but it was better than nothing.

For half an hour, Dallion and the crackling continued walking. Every now and again, Nox would stop, then change direction. At first Dallion thought that the cub was getting a better feeling of the direction, but soon he started to suspect that the creatures they were chasing were on the move as well.

At this point, firebird intervention became necessary. Ordering Lux to propel him forward, Dallion then had Nox jump on his shoulder. This way, he had both a crackling seeker and a propulsion system. The only problem was that Luxbeing the embodiment of flamestill had problems considering that Dallion might not be as used to high speeds as it was. The first intense burst made Dallion feel nauseous. His body level prevented him from outright throwing up, though he wasnt far away. The second was a bit more measured, though still with a lot to be desired. It was only after

the tenth that a balance between speed and comfort was established. It was also around that point that their enemy came into view.

Nox hissed. As any crackling, he was highly territorial and did not appreciate others that weren't part of his pack. The cracklings that had been released in the realm were of a similar opinion, letting out a loud growl.

That brought back memories. Of course, back then Dallion's level was considerably lower than it was now. He could easily slash them with a single zig-zag attack with his harpsword. However, there was something else he wanted to try.

Sorry, Harp. Dallion summoned his Nox dagger. There's something I want to try. Nox, he shouted. Get back in there.

Confused, the crackling looked at him, but obeyed.

Lux, you can let me go.

The firebird chirped and dropped Dallion to the ground. The release method also needed work, but that was something for another time.

A dozen steps ahead, the pack of cracklings snarled at Dallion. The fear was more than the aggression. In a battle, it was obvious who the winner would be, but even so, the cracklings couldn't step back; their entire existence depended on them infesting the realm further.

I don't suppose you'll be fine to surrender? Dallion asked.

In response, the giant wolf leaped at him. There was no way they would. They weren't guardians after all.

He wasn't a dagger back then.

As much as he wanted this to work, Dallion knew it was a long shot. However, there was more to it. The experience with the noble had reminded him of something sometime soon, Dallion was going to have to start fighting more in the real world. Whether it was going to be in the wilderness, against members of the mirror pool, or against the Star itself, he was going to have to get used to real fighting, and for that he had to be able to handle his Nox dagger adequately.

A head emerged from the crackling-wolfs body and sunk its teeth into Dallions leg.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 10%

Unphased, Dallion struck the beast in the forehead, making it poof out of existence. Still, this was an indication that his combat skills were far from perfect.

So many stats, and to think all of them were important. Focusing along one path was a possible solution, but more and more Dallion was starting to consider the idea of a maximized development. After all, the only thing better than a specialist in one field was a specialist in all fields. The only thing it was going to take was a lot more effort and despite Nils warning achievements. While collecting achievements came at a future cost, they also allowed him to improve his stats to levels that simple leveling up couldnt achieve.

The fight continued for a few minutes more. The crackling pack had managed to inflict a few more wounds, though thanks to Lux Dallion had quickly restored his lost health. In the end, the realm was flawless once again. Unfortunately, there were no achievements and Nox remained at his previous level.

Its not a matter of support. There are way too many things you have started to pile on more. For example, what happened to your plans to practice your forging skills and make new equipment?

Dallion remained silent. He very much planned to start focusing on that, it was just that other things constantly popped up. And it didnt help that he had chosen a really complicated hammer

Or you singing to the stone orchid until it blossoms?

Im already doing it for work

Improving your stiletto daily? Improving a level a day? Fixing your awakened realm? Need I go on?

Ill get to all that! Its just been a difficult week. I didnt expect Gloria to show up, and with that new assignment March gave me, its normal that Im taking a while to organize my thoughts.

Dear boy, youre an awakened. You literally have all the time in the world. And even with that, you are unable to do all the things youve set out to do. And you never will. It seems you love starting things, as if your life depended on you doing so. However, when it comes to finishing them, you slack off. I have no doubt that youll fix that at some point as you level up, but until then you need to limit your new goals at least for a bit.

As much as Dallion hated hearing it, he knew the echo to be right. When he had come to Nerosal, he had done with pretty much one main goal to find out more about the city in the hopes he'd find other people from Earth. It had been years true time since he had given the matter any thought. Getting to the inn, then the Icepicker guild had quickly changed his priorities, making him focus along a certain path. So many new goals had sprung up, from the mundane to the quite serious and that was before his Euryale episode. A while back, it seemed that becoming an official guild member would be the hurdle that would grant him all the time and freedom in the world. Well, it hadn't.

I know life is complicated, dear boy, but sometimes you must just focus on a few things. The world won't end if you leave a few things for later. Leave Nox at level two. Decide which of the things you want to focus on the most and stick to them. When you get bored, switch them around, or just add a few more.

That was good advice. Nil definitely sounded like a teacher who had seen others go through the same many times.

What would you suggest?

Well, if you'd like my opinion, you should focus on the key aspect of it all personal development. You're at level fourteen. I think you should be at least at fifteen. However, to get there, I feel you need to learn how to split more efficiently, which means a few lessons with Vend.

Lessons then leveling. It sounded logical, although Dallion couldn't help but feel that there were so many other things calling out for him.

Pick one. Easier said than done. Of all the things he had started, what should he focus on? The stone orchid wasn't a bad choice. After all, it was calm and would help him chill after all the training and fighting in the realms. And who knows, if it blossomed, it was something he could give to Eury when she returned.

Or maybe he could learn to play the ringchord? The old man at performers plaza said that it was an old instrument, so maybe learning it would make Dallion seem more exotic. Somehow, that felt more like a hobby than anything else.

The familiars were another possibility. With Nox having a home, it was only right that Dallion found one for Lux. All in all, that didn't sound too difficult. All it took was for him to buy a spheric item, fulfil its destiny, then give it to the firebird and link it to his realm. Then he could check

whether he could use it to heal wounds in the real world, similar to what the Nox dagger was capable of.

Everything so far seemed like a good choice, but Dallion felt it still didnt hit the mark. After a moment, he knew what his focus would be. No doubt it was going to delay him finding answers about Earth, and likely affect his rise in the guild, but despite that, it was the one thing he felt he had to do.

Chapter 200: Advanced Splitting

Upon returning to the real world, Dallion had enough time to catch up to Vend and the rest. After a few minutes of hesitation, he did just that. The group had engaged in a discussion about areas and area guardians with Veil sharing his experience and Vend giving out a few pointers. Gloria tagging along a few steps behind. Dallion could seethanks to his music skillsthat the conversation was boring her. He could also see that something was worrying her.

Not the most organized job, he Dallion said with a smile. Dont worry, theyre usually better than this.

Oh, Im used to it. The girl put up a brave front. It was impressive how good an actor she was. Without Dallions abilities, he would never have suspected that her facade was fake. Remember the time I dragged you to fight the sand dragon?

Dragged wasnt the term Id use.

Back then, Dallion had no idea if he could trust her, yet had gone along nonetheless. It turned out to be the good move that eventually led to his victory over the village chiefa victory that seemed incredibly fortunate now. It was tempting to say that those were simpler times, but given how little Dallion knew about anything, it was the most confusing and complicated time of his life. Still, there were a lot fewer things for him to worry about or so he thought.

You were right about the cities, Gloria went on. Its not a bad place.

Told you. Dallion winked. And it has nothing to do with you getting loads of attention here, eh?

Please. Gloria held her chin high. Ive always been getting a lot of attention. But youre right. Its nice to have this sort of attention. Here, Im just a girl with pure blond hair that got an invitation for a theatre troupe. Back home

Dallion nodded. Back home, both in Dherma and on Earth, he had never had that problem. Maybe college would have been different, although thats what he said about high school and that didnt turn out as expected.

Give it a while. With the village being a level three, youll have lots of new people showing up. Settlers, merchants, artisans. Maybe youll have your very own awakened guild.

You always dreamed big. I doubt it, though. A level three village is still a village, and we cant level it up to a town.

The crowds of people staring at them were less on the way back. The rumors that the noble had returned to her home had spread, making the majority of onlookers return to their everyday lives.

There would still be the occasional comment about the clothes, mostly between children and their parents, but the spectacle was largely over.

Reaching the guild, Dallion and Gloria rushed downstairs in search of their old clothes. Veil, on the other hand, continued with his conversations. For whatever reason he wasn't bothered by the clothes, even went as far as to ask Estezol whether he could keep them. Much to his disappointment, the outfit was deemed guild property, although the short, bearded man promised he'd speak with the guild forgers if something could be arranged on the matter.

As for Vend, he disappeared upstairs to report on the task.

Im never wearing silver again, Dallion thought as he carefully removed his attire. Damaging it would end up getting him into a whole lot of trouble.

The boy has some baggage. Whenever he gets too many compliments, he starts worrying that something bad is about to happen. Anyway, that's a story for another time. He's mentioned your involvement, if that's what you're worried about.

That's not it. I just wanted to ask him about some training.

The echo didn't reply. After finishing getting into his old clothes, Dallion rushed out and up the staircase. Passing the lobby, he continued up.

Before he could finish, one of the doors on the floor swung open and Vend emerged. His expression and demeanor was the same as ever, but Dallion could see the hurt that vibrated through him. One would almost say that he had failed at the last job, not succeeded.

Yes, Dal? Vend immediately asked upon seeing him.

I want you to teach me more about splitting, Dallion said, and instantly regretted it. His stubbornness had played a nasty joke on him once again. He should have listened to Nil on this one. Doesn't have to be right away, he added after a few seconds. I just think that if

No, its fine. The elite suppressed a smile. I didnt have anything to do, anyway.

To Dallions surprise, he seemed like he was telling the truth. What was more, Vend seemed somewhat relieved by the idea, or rather he saw it as an excuse to take his mind off something else. Without warning, he grabbed Dallions hand.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

In the blink of an eye Dallion found himself in the grey block of a room. There were no doors or windows, although there were a series of stone seats on the sides, as well as a black square carpet covering the middle of the floor.

Sorry about that. Vend went to the nearest seat and collapsed inside. It was only here that Dallion could see how exhausted the elite really were. In the real world, even the music skills had hidden the fact. In theory, that was supposed to be impossible, but then Dallion remembered what his mentor had said about splittingit provided choices. One of those choices could well have been no one noticing how tired he really was. The theory was a stretch, but with someone like Vend, one never knew.

Long day? Dallion asked, taking a seat nearby.

The usual nonsense. It has nothing to do with the job we did. Sometimes life is just full of turns and there arent enough splits to straighten it out.

Is it about Arthurows?

The silence was palpable. It had been a while since anyone had voiced that name. Uttering it now left a bitter taste in Dallions mouth.

No, Vend said firmly, eyes still closed. Other guild matters. Nothing to do with you. There was a slight pause. Or your friends.

Normally, Dallion wouldnt have considered Veil or Gloria capable of getting in trouble in a city this size. Even with the limiting echo gone, the fear that their grandfather had instilled from cities was sure to keep them on their toes. However, having Vend be so firm about it made Dallion wonder.

Why should they be in trouble?

You dont know much, do you? Vend sighed. I guess youll find out sooner or later. Better from me than hearing about it on the street. Pure blonds are star-touched.

The notion came as a shock.

So you can come to the wrong conclusion, like Vend? Pure blonds are a rarity that some people find exotic. Thats it. Everything else is baseless speculation. They arent cursed, not are they saviors, they just are.

Saviors?

Clearly, there was more to the story, but Nil was unlikely to elaborate. If anything, the echo was annoyed he had to share as much as he had. And Vend, on the other hand, had no intention of talking on the matter at all.

So what do you want to know about splitting? the elite asked. Ive seen you do it, so I know youre capable of that.

It was so tempting to ask more about this whole blondness thing, but Dallion held his tongue. Only three things. He had to focus on only three things. Anything else hed only be mindful of.

You didnt tell us all there was, Dallion said.

You could tell?

It sounded too simple. If I could understand it from one go, there had to be more.

Vend sat up, then stared at Dallion for five full seconds.

Either youre really smart or incredibly stupid. One of these days Ill figure it out. Until then, I guess Ill tell you a trick or two. Vend then stood up. You been improving your training dagger?

Sure have. Dallion summoned the weapon. After so many improvements, the dagger had become bronze. He was rather pleased with it, even if he felt he could have boosted it by another level or two.

Level seven? Vend asked, at which Dallion nodded. Alright, I want you to split and attack me.

That might be slightly difficult. My heads still ringing from the splitting I did a while back.

Let it keep ringing. Do you want to learn something or not?

Taking a deep breath, Dallion focused as much as he could, finally creating two instances of himself. The moment he did, he charged forward. In one case, he aimed high with a circular arc attack aimed at Vends chest. The other instance went for the elites left leg. At that point, Vend also broke into instances. Dallion saw him block each of the attacks, disarming him in one case.

Having no choice, Dallion went with the lesser of two bad situations, allowing himself to be blocked. To his surprise, not only did Vend stop the attack, but pulled the stiletto out of his hand in a surprise counterattack.

The demonstration over, Vend then took a step back, leaving Dallion disarmed and very much in disbelief.

You werent supposed to take that, Dallion said, still trying to figure out what had just happened. I chose the instance in which you blocked.

You probably did. And I chose to create an instance of that instance. Cold determination flashed in his eyes, after which he returned Dallion his dagger. Just because you created instances doesn't mean I couldn't create more.

You split into twice as many instances. That was a nasty trick. No wonder Dallion had lost. It was like taking a knife to a gunfight.

The number doesn't matter. It's more a case of timing. When I saw you split in two instances, I treated each of them as a normal attack. I could have split twice, or more. The important thing is to do it once you were done. Any earlier and I wouldn't have anything to react to.

Dallion had often heard the term three-dimensional chess. This was the closest thing to it he could imagine, only it was far more complicated.

So, my solution would have been to create even more instances and trick your instances? Dallion asked. His head was hurting just imagining it.

That's one solution. Again, you have to find the right moment. You didn't see me split, did you?

Dallion shook his head.

First you need to see it, then you can react. The simplest way is to rely on brute force and double the instances. At one point someone will give in and the winner will choose the instance to their advantage. However, that only works if you have double the mind level of your opponent. To be able to fight with an equal or lower level, you have to be good at refreshing.

Refreshing?

Our encounter just now. You saw that I didn't disarm you in one instance, so you chose it. However, that was also planned on my part. The moment I saw your preference, I redid one of my instances. In your mind, the outcome was already predetermined, so you were going through the motions. It wasn't. In order to catch the change, the correct thing was to end the instances and split again.

Dallion stared blankly.

Raise your hands, the elite said. Hands shoulder height, palms towards me.

Dallion obeyed.

Each hand is an instance. The moment you create the instance I can see them, and can react accordingly. Vend summoned two knives and pointed each at one of Dallion's hands. Now, since you can't, in order for you to evade my attacks, you can do only one thing—move your hands.

Dallion did so, slowly. Vend continued moving his knives forward, towards the places where Dallion's hands had been.

Still two instances, the elite said as the knives missed Dallion's hands. However, since I didn't refresh the instances, I'm doomed to miss.

But what if you create two new instances to aim at my hands again? Dallion asked.

That's called instance dancing. And the person who does it better, is likely to win every time.