

## Leveling up 221

### Chapter 221: Guardian Unchained

Whatever the snakes poison was, it had an effect on metal as well. There was no hissing sound as the poison dug into the armadil shield, but for Dallion, it was as if he could hear the guardian screaming in agony. His music skills told him exactly how much pain the shield was in, and his forging skills let him see the invisible cracks seep in, spreading like deadly roots. In over a minute, they would eat their way through the entire form of the gear and then the guardian would die.

Lux, can you heal him and keep me in the air?

The firebird spread its flame to cover the shield as well as Dallion. Its curing flames, however, had no effect on the poison.

No! Dallion shouted.

There had to be a way. If Dallion had been the one targeted, there was an even chance that he would be mostly fine in the real world. When it came to gears, though. Destroying one utterly here could well destroy it out there as well. At first there would be no change the item would remain as it was; it could even have the same qualities as it always did, but that would be false. Without its guardian the item was nothing but a hollow shell. Then, one day, without warning, it would crumble to pieces, never to be restored again.

Hang in there! I can fix this! Dallion would enter the realm as many times as it took to defeat the poison, whatever its form was. He would

The harpsisword vibrated in its sheath, its strength increasing until Dallion couldn't ignore it any longer.

What, Harp? he summoned the weapon in his hand.

Let him go. The strings played on their own, forming words. Drop him down.

No! Dallion replied. He had no intention of abandoning the dryad. He had no intention of abandoning anyone.

He wants you to let him go, the melody said. Right now. Straight down.

A cocktail of emotions raged through Dallion, but looking at the harpsisword, he could see only one truthfulness. It was strong and pure, filling the form of the weapon from tip to hilt. It was very likely that was what the shield wanted, but even so, Dallion didn't have the strength to do it.

I'll find a way, he said under his breath.

No sooner had he finished than Nox emerged in the air. With a precise action, he swiped at the straps that held the shield on Dallion's arm. There was a slight sensation of pain. Three slight marks appeared on Dallion's hand. The experience was so shocking that Dallion froze for a few seconds, watching the shield start its fall down towards the island snake below.

Nox? he asked, but the crackling had entered back into its realm.

*Nox, what did you do?*

As it fell, the armadil shield extended, turning into a sphere. In the past it had done so multiple times, protecting Dallion from all and any external threats. This time, though, the shield continued extending, creating a second layer over itself.

The island snake recoiled.

Lux, up! Dallion shouted.

Just as he suspected, another poison attack followed, although this time the target didnt seem to be Dallion, but the shield itself. Brownish poison coated an entire side of the ball, corrupting the material as it did. In less than a second, it spread to the entire surface. It was like watching an object decay sped up a hundred times. But things didnt end there. When the last spot of the shields surface became rusty brown, the sphere burst into rust. Both layers were scattered in the air, revealing a dryad.

Shield? Dallion blinked.

There was no doubt that he was looking at the guardian of the armadil shield, but this wasnt the dryad he had seen on any of his visits. The casual nature of the dryad had disappeared, along with his weird outfits. It was a warrior in the air now, clad in an armor of living wood. Long wooden quarterstaves were in each of his hands an unusual weapon of choice from Dallion had seen in this world.

With a loud hiss, the snake moved back. It was almost as if it was scared of the dryad. Moments later, it became obvious why. As the dryad reached the water level, a small island emerged, providing a place to land. The island was minuscule compared to the ones before, but the fact that it had appeared at all dazzled the imagination.

Sorry for the scare, Dal, the dryad said, his words reaching Dallion despite the vast distance. Ill take over now. You just stay up there and be ready.

Ready for what? Dallion asked, but the dryad had already charged forward.

It seemed as if the guardian was splitting the water, heading towards the snake as fast as an arrow.

The snake swirled, the end of its massive archipelago body, moving to meet the approaching attacker. Normally, such an attack was enough to defeat any opponent, especially one who wasnt equipped with a slashing weapon.

A massive clash followed, shaking the entire realm. A forest of trees emerged from the sea, protecting the dryad from the snakes tail. The monster didnt give up, pulling its tail back for another attack. Midway, though, the tail refused to move. The crowns of the newly emerged trees had wrapped themselves round the island snakes tail, entangling it in place. As much as the snake tried, it could not break free.

The dryad immediately took advantage, running along the branches with the ease of a squirrel. With one action, he merged the staffs together. The sharp blade of a halberd formed. Despite the distance Dallon was able to see it clearly not a weapon summon, the wood itself transformed as if it were water.

The blade swung towards the snake's tail. Before it could reach it, the realm's guardian detached that part of its body and moved back, squirting concentrated poison from both its fangs. The island that was entangled, however, remained.

## **BODY SEVERED**

**VERMILION will no longer be able to make use of his TAIL SECTIONS 5 and 6.**

A third of the snake's health disappeared, just like that. From the sky, Dallon could only watch in awe and amazement. Had the shield had that power all along? If so, why was he only using it now?

The dryad thrust backwards, avoiding the poison as it sprinkled all over the detached islands. The stench of rot and acid filled the air, rising to the heavens. Now it was the snake's turn to attack, which it did, by creating an air slice that split the sea. Thankfully, the dryad managed to avoid it. Unfortunately, that allowed the snake to move back to the body segments held by the thicket of trees.

## **BODY REATTACHED**

**VERMILION will once more be able to make use of his TAIL SECTIONS 5 and 6.**

It can reattach itself? Dallon gasped. Clearly, the battle was going to be more difficult than he thought. Then again, it was going much better than a minute ago, when he feared that the shield would be corroded out of existence, and he himself sentenced to a slow ejection.

The battle continued to grow in intensity. Water, venom, rock, and wood appeared and dispersed in wild fury. Several times, the shield forced the snake to detach parts of its body only to have them reattach later on.

Even if it wasn't much, if he could give a slight advantage to the dryad, maybe the battle would tilt in his favor. How to do it, though? The safe way was to waken the snake though against something this large that would turn out next to impossible. A few attempts quickly showed that even when combining the harp's word with his singing, Dallon couldn't afflict any change within the snake.

At this point, there was one single alternative: to buff the dryad. Strength didn't seem to be an issue, and neither was speed. If anything, it was the snake that was lacking in this aspect. Confidence didn't seem a problem either. Still, there was one thing that the dryad lacked mobility, or more specifically, flight.

*Can I grant flight with music?*

Dallon wondered. That sounded more in the realm of magic. Making the dryad lighter could achieve that possibly, but there was a much better solution, one that Dallon had observed for thousands of hours back on Earth.

Playing a chord, he focused on the trees the shield constantly summoned. Seeing that their frequency was the same regardless of how many there were, Dallon synched up, then did the exact

thing that Nil had shown him during the very first music lesson: if you sync with something forcefully and force it to freeze, it remains static for a second. Such an approach wouldnt work on powerful creatures or strong opponents, but it would work on pieces of wood

Shield! Dallion shouted, while still playing. Run on the branches!

That was the worst possible hint one could giveit conveyed no useful information and became more confusing the more someone thought about it. Thankfully, the dryad had spent enough time with Dallion to get accustomed to his logic.

A new forest emerged from the water, flying towards the snake. As before, the realm guardian covered it with poison, then tore out the trees with one swing of its massive tail. Unlike all the previous times, though, the dryad was counting on that. Instead of summoning a new set of trees, he continued running forward. A few seconds later, the tree fragments in the air burst into hundreds of smaller pieces, no larger than the size of a persons foot. At precisely that moment, they all froze still in the air.

Dallion couldnt keep the smile off his face. The plan had worked.

Taking advantage, the dryad jumped in the air, pushing himself from one to the next. For that single second, each piece of wood had become a piece of immovable platform, allowing him to achieve an effect similar to flight. Watching him, Dallion could barely keep up. The shield guardians speed had increased ten times at least, making his movement similar to that of a firebird.

The snake had no idea what was going on. Its eyes moved wildly, trying to focus on its enemy, but the massive body took a while to follow. The dryads speed had gone beyond the snakes perception level, or Dallions for that matter, making the creature have to find only afterimages.

This was like watching an anime, only it was the real thing. The dryads level had to be way out there. It was undoubtedly beyond twenty, likely beyond forty at least, or maybe even more.

Dal, the dryads voice reached him. Get ready. Im giving you this one.

Giving me what? Dallion asked on instinct.

The answer followed immediately. Pushing himself off a piece of wood, the dryad flew towards the snakes head. It was large as an island, with fangs the size of cliffs. The dryads weapon changed again, transforming into a spear. For a fraction of a second, a targeting marker appeared just beneath the monsters jaw.

## **BODY SEVERED**

**VERMILION will no longer be able to make use of his TAIL SECTIONS 1, 2,3,4, 5 and 6.**

A giant red rectangle appeared as a massive tree shattered the connection between the head and the other islands that composed the snake. At this point, the guardian was virtually helpless. All it could do was shoot venom as before, but there was no chance for the creature to reattach its body. A new thicket of trees sprouted from the sea, keeping the island in the air, growing in such a fashion as to push the snakes upper jaw further up to the point it couldnt bite or use its poison effectively.

Now, Dallion thought.

Lux, get me there! Dallion shouted as he let go of the harpsisword. Given the size and the creature, it was going to take something different to cut through the brille attached to the eyes. Get ready, Nox!

This was going to be it.

Chapter 222: On the Loose

## **FATAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage increased by 500%**

The Nox dagger drilled through the brill protecting the eye as if it were made of paper. The crack was less than a fraction of an inch wide, but enough for the blade to sink into the eye, reducing the snakes remaining health by half.

The entire head of the island snake trembled, despite the entangled forest keeping it in place.

Steady, Lux, Dallion said as the firebird pulled him away from the snake. Theres nothing to be worried about. Just one more and were done.

Dallion pulled the dagger out. The dryad was standing on a tree a few dozen feet from him. It was thanks to him that the snake was in this state, and he had left Dallion to take the victory. Not that there was anything to complain about, but Dallion had no idea that his shield guardian was so strong or that he could emerge from his shield state. The harpsisword had sort of done it, but it was nowhere as impressive as this. Did that mean that the dryad was stronger than the nymph?

You made me underestimate you, the snake said, its voice echoing through the air. Clever move to send you in. Id never think level fifteen to be a threat, while you had secret help all along.

Dallions more rash side wanted to shout out some comeback. However, he had to admit that the snake was right. It had taken two familiars to keep him alive and two equipment guardians to fight for him. Without any of those Dallion would have lost for certain.

Youre too late, the snake attempted to laugh, thick yellow liquid oozing from its eye. This piece of the seal will do nothing since hes already escaped.

Escaped? Dallion paused from going through with the final blow. In all the movies he had watched on Earth, that was the worst thing to do, and still the phrase had sparked a powerful flame of curiosity in him that needed feeding.

Do you have you keep pretending?

So, youre just another sacrifice. To think that youd end up being victorious

As you said, I had some help, Dallion admitted. Who escaped? he repeated the question.

Will you let me be if I tell you?

An interesting bargaining chip. It was clear that there was no way out for the snake. Dallion had both the tools and the will to go through with this. As long as he killed the guardian, he would complete the mirror pools task, which should get him and Gloria off the hook.

No.

Honesty? the snake snorted. A good quality in the worst of times. But even that doesn't matter. You'll never be able to find him. You can tell the Star and the rest of the world that. He has been out for years, it's only now that you started bothering to find out. And he might not be alone.

I don't really need to know, Dallion decided to bluff, filling his words with certainty thanks to his music skill. I was only hired to clear the ring. One more strike and I'll do that.

Go ahead.

Mockery radiated from the snake's very being. It either didn't believe Dallion would go through with it, or simply didn't care.

Sorry, Dallion whispered, and performed his final attack.

### **FATAL STRIKE**

#### **Dealt damage increased by 500%**

A roar unlike any Dallion had heard filled the air. It wasn't coming from the head along; all the islands let out a scream, then returned to silence as the creature's health reached zero.

The copycat is out there, the snake managed to say in its dying breath. It's already out there

### **VERMILION'S TEARS destiny has been fulfilled.**

#### **Your Attack skills have increased to 28**

Attack? Not the best, but still an improvement nonetheless. If Dallion wasn't under so much pressure, he would have used his acrobatics more.

Dallion was just about to ask the dryad if he had any idea what was going, when he found himself back in the study surrounded by people. Lacking Lux, gravity took hold of Dallion with full strength, pulling him to the floor. Unable to keep his balance, Dallion stumbled, letting the artifact fall from his hand.

Kid? You okay? the tattooed man asked with the concern of someone who would have a contract void if anything were to happen to Dallion.

Yeah, Dallion managed to say. It was a bit rougher. He glanced at his shield.

The piece of gear was strapped to his left arm, as it had been before. The more interesting part was that there didn't seem to be any marks or corroded parts on it. Everything was just as it was supposed to, very much to Dallion's relief.

What happened in there? the silhouette figure asked, its voice a mix of dozens others, both male and female.

The guardian of the realm was a giant snake made of islands, Dallion replied. In fact, he was in the realm. All the ones you sent before me died on the spot. I was lucky I didn't.

There was no need for him to share the details. The mirror pool already knew too much about him and his familiars; there was no need to provide them with additional information, especially concerning the abilities of his guardian.

I think he was called Vermilion. Dallion inadvertently looked at the floor in search of the ring.

As suspected, the artifact was there, but it no longer was a ring it had now transformed into a key. In other circumstances, Dallion would have asked to keep it as his prize, but something told him that this wouldnt be an option this time.

Vermilion? the woman from the Order asked. For the first time since hed come in, Dallion saw a spark or interest in her.

Thats what it looked like. Why?

Its not your concern. Did the guardian say anything? Maybe before you started the battle or afterwards?

A talking guardian? the fury asked.

All named guardians talk, the woman from the Order replied with a semi-sigh.

Is my work done? Dallion turned to the tattooed man. With this were all good and youll leave Gloria alone?

We wont harm her. Well even help with her chosen career. That should be good enough, I hope?

Provided you dont use her to ask me to do suicide jobs again.

Granted. If we have any suicide jobs, well approach you directly now answer the question.

On the other hand, from Dallions interactions with copyettes, he didnt think they were nearly as bad as they were described. After all, dryads and nymphs were also imprisoned races, and they seemed pretty okay.

After I defeated him, the guardian said that I was too late and that hed already gotten out of there, Dallion said after a while.

He? the woman of the Order asked.

A copyette.

To Dallions senses, it felt as if there was an explosion in the room. Everyones fear suddenly peaked, screaming from them like a fire alarm.

Youre sure? the woman grabbed him by the shoulder.

Thats what he said. Dallion tried to pull away, but the grip was too firm. The womans level had to be higher than his.

Anything else?

Nothing. Just that Im too late and the copyette has been out for years. Why? Is it that important?

Everyone looked at him, as if he had asked the stupidest question in the world. That was exactly what Dallion was going for. The best way to make sure that he wouldnt be interrogated about something was to create the appearance that he had no idea what he was talking about. And still, he didnt think there being a copyette on the loose was such a big deal. Or was it?

A few years. The tattooed man crossed his arms. With that much time, he could have become anyone. Maybe even a noble.

The Order would have sensed if that were the case, the woman countered. No, hes hiding somewhere, amassing skills. When he has enough of them, hell make his first move. She bent down and took the key from the floor. The Order will take care of things from here. No need for you to get involved.

Lady, I dont want to get involved, the tattooed replied. Trust me.

I dont think thats what's been harming explorers, though, Dallion said. That was the guardian. I guess he didnt want anyone from learning the secret. Or getting the key. Personally, I think that You did your job, the tattooed man interrupted. Cloud will take you to your room.

Dallion nodded. Not the best that could have happened, but something he expected. It would have been nice if they had given him some reward for his troubles, but knowing that Gloria would no longer be their target was more than enough. He only hoped that they kept their word.

Needless to say, youre not to repeat any rumors out in the open, the woman said. But in case you find something, let the Order know.

Of course, Dallion replied. Out of curiosity, what can a copyette do exactly? Even if everything written in the historical scrolls is true, its just one being.

One being with the ability to transform into anyone and learn nearly any skills. Given enough time they will find an organization to infiltrate then slowly rise to the top. It might be a guild, the city guard, a merchant organization, or even the city itself. If you only knew how many wars were started because of stray copyettes. In your place Id be careful of the people around you.

Ill do that.

Moments later, Dallion was led out of the mansion and, to be honest, he felt quite relieved. Not so much because he feared the people inside might do something to him; it was the mansion that really creeped him out.

I take it there will be no reward? Dallion asked once he and Cloud were out in the open.

Dont push it.

Dallion didnt. He could feel how tense she was, and knew from experience what she was capable of when she was pissed off.

Just as before, the fury pulled him up in the air and started the flight back to the open window of his room. Soon hed be back there and no one would be the wiser.

How do I find out if someone is a copyette or not? he broke the silence after a while.

You dont. After this much time in the open, the copyette would have learned to bleed. The only way to tell for certain is to kill whoever you suspect and hope for the best.

That didnt sound very practical for anyone else other than the fury. The way things were going, hed have to ask Nil more on the matter, and the armadil shielddefinitely the armadil shield! What the dryad had done in the ring was way too unusual for him not to. The moment he was back in his



room and was sure the mirror pool wasn't anywhere near he was going to enter the realm of the shield and have a long conversation on the matter. Hopefully, it was going to be a peaceful conversation.

What about the key? Dallion persisted. What does it open?

Something important enough to have a death trap in the keys realm. Maybe it's the key to the copyette's prison, or the prison of a thousand like him. All that matters is that you keep your mouth shut.

As long as you keep your end of the bargain.

You don't get it. There are fifty people within the pool that can kill you in less than a minute. You're not worth their time even without the hunters' protection. We are in the business of giving warnings. The copyette isn't. The moment he finds out someone is asking about him, we might end up having a new Dallion and no one will even realize.

Chapter 223: Lifetime of Bad Habits

### **ITEM AWAKENING**

The shield's realm was slightly different from before. It wasn't that the rooms or the furniture in them had changed, rather, it was the state of everything. Here and there, green and purple veins were visible on the walls and floor, like cracks, but different.

I'll be with you shortly. The dryad's shout came from the upper floor. Give me a moment to change.

No problem, Dallion replied. After the battle that had taken place, he was in no mood to give the guardian a hard time. True, there were questions that needed answers, but the dryad had single-handedly won a battle that, by all accounts, would have been lost.

*What's a*

*Primal creatures? Things that appear in artifacts that haven't been screened by the guild. That's why it's dangerous dealing with them. Sure, everyone dreams of the treasures they might get and ignores everything else. You should have never been in that artifact to begin with! In fact, you never should have been dealing with the pool.*

The sound of descending steps put an abrupt end to the mental conversation. Dallion looked up. The dryad was wearing green knee-length britches and a white, loosely fitting long-sleeved shirt. The sleeves, however, weren't able to fully cover the wound that started from his hand and went all the way up to his neck.

Your hand, Dallion pointed.

Ah. The dryad glanced at it casually. A minor effect of the battle. Nothing to worry about. Back in my day, I would have healed it in a couple of hours, but due to my current limitations, it'll take a few

weeks. If possible, I'd ask that you don't take me into battle for a while. Well, unless you absolutely have to.

A few weeks A few hours ago, Dallion was worried that the shield could be permanently damaged, even destroyed. It was outright annoying how calm the dryad was about it.

What are you, shield? Dallion asked.

So you're not just here to see how well I'm doing?

You're not doing well, but you're hiding it. Dallion said sharply. My perception is sixteen now. I can smell the stench coming from your arm. It's the same that's coming from the wall.

The casualties of battle. You tend to come across strong guardians every now and again. You should know that better than anyone. The guardians smile shrank. You had to fight the Star during your entrance test.

True, but the Star wasn't terrified by me. He took a step forward. I saw the snake, shield. When you appeared in that form, it recoiled from you. I've seen guardians afraid from awakened, but not to that extent.

There was a long moment of silence. The dryad walked past Dallion to one of the walls that was most affected. Slowly, he slid his unhurt hand over the purple cracks. As if sensing his fingers, the ends of the cracks moved away.

When someone is exiled in an item, there's usually a reason, the shield said, his back still turned to Dallion. I know it's fashionable to make sweeping overgeneralizations, but in some cases people deserved it. You haven't seen a real war yet. There's none of your kind that has. Some have witnessed a few light skirmishes, or some squabbles between nobles, and you confuse that for a war. The wars I and your harpsisword have been through, they can't compare. You're like a candle telling the sun that there's no difference between you. Well, there is. He turned around. The reason I became a companion armor wasn't because of the form I was given. They could have imprisoned me in a cup, or a ring, or even a comb, for all I care. I was simply tired of all the fighting the real fighting, so I decided to go for change. Quite a few companions and tutor artifacts made that choice. Combat artifacts, like your harpsisword, didn't.

Dallion said nothing. He had felt Harp's strength. Even before being tricked into his leveling trial during the sanitation job, he knew that he was far stronger than she let out to be. However, she had never done what the armadil shield had. On the other hand, she had asked Dallion to let the shield go in battle.

Vermilion wasn't someone you could have won against. I doubt any awakened in your guild could have. I had no choice but to intervene it was like the wars of my past. That's pretty much all I could tell you.

Why?

Because I don't want to talk about it anymore, the dryad said sharply. You're almost an empath, a gift from the Seven Moons. You've done me more good than you know, but there are things I can't tell even you.

This sounded serious. It wasn't the usual you'll learn when the time comes. The guardian genuinely didn't want to talk about it, and as much as Dallion wanted answers, there was nothing he could do on the topic at least as far as the shield was concerned.

What was Vermilion? Dallion changed the direction of the conversation.

A guard dog, nothing more. They were strong in large numbers, but on their own well, you saw.

So, he was protecting something important

Maybe, maybe not. He wouldn't be able to stop a high-level awakened. Given the low standards of the present day, who knows. Maybe the person who put him there thought it would be enough. Either way, don't worry about it.

Who says I'm worried?

The dryad laughed.

I know you well enough. You're wondering if the key opens more than the copyette's prison. In your place, I'd worry more about that.

The copyette?

The fact that it escaped. Whether it's weak or strong, that's not the issue. Even in the current state of the world, there are enough awakened to deal with him. Having the knowledge to release the imprisoned back into the world that would create a cataclysm none of you had seen before.

Dallion was incapable of describing what he felt. It would be easy to call it fear, but it was so much beyond that, to the point that the threat itself was deemed unreal. It was like saying that the Sun would consume the Earth in several million years hopelessly terrifying and yet waved away. The difference here was that this wasn't an event that would take place in the far future, but could occur any day now.

If the snake was to be believed and the copyette had been free for years, allowing it to do all sorts of havoc, including slowly building up an army of others like it. Even Arthur's Star was terrified of the prospect, unless that too had been an act.

What do you suggest? Dallion asked.

You're asking for my advice? The dryad looked at him, then laughed. It was a low, bitter laugh that continued for close to half a minute. The blind leading the blind. You really want the advice of someone who was imprisoned in a shield because of things I'd done?

You have experience in that matter. I don't.

The harpist's word probably also had experience, but was that someone Dallion should ask? If she knew anything on the topic, she would have told him.

Do I try to find him? Dallion asked directly.

Don't you have enough problems already? the dryad frowned. I know you're going to try and do it no matter what I say. What you really want to know is how to find the copyette and what to do once you do. Let me save you some trouble. There's only one thing you can do once you find it kill it. Are you prepared for that?

That was the big question Dallion feared. So far, he hadn't killed anyone, in this world or back on Earth. Cracks and similar beings were the only exception. If he were to continue along this road, he would have to do just that

I will be, Dallion said firmly. Unless you lied about the upcoming war.

Oh, I didn't lie. But you might find it more difficult than you think. That's the weakness of empaths. Despite all your strength, you tend to shy away from problems. You pretend to have a reason, or to be clumsy, or whatever other excuse you can find. The dryad moved closer to Dallion and placed his left hand on his shoulder. I quite like you, you know. You're different from a lot of people in this age, but you're not ready for this.

I said I will be! Dallion shook the hand off. Will you tell me, or not?

Sure, the dryad replied with a sigh. You'll need a working kaleidervisto. You've cleared a few for your guild, so they should be findable. They won't work on their own, mind you. You'll need to be close to the copyette and get it to experience a strong emotion. Fear, anger you know the drill. The guardian waved his hand. Do that and you'll spot the copyette. Of course, it'll spot you as well.

Thanks. Dallion turned around. There was no reason for him to do so. He had the power to leave the realm instantly if he wished, but for some reason, he felt he should. Seeing the dryad look at him as he left felt uncomfortable.

*It's true. Do you think I'm ready to face a copyette?*

*Definitely not. If you fight it now, you'll lose. Maybe if you get to level twenty and*

As usual, things had a way to get more complicated. Having at least one point of stability in his life would be nice. Instead, Dallion was plagued by all sorts of problems, from the trivial personal, to the end of the world.

Dal, the dryad said. If you're serious about this, there's one thing you need to do.

Dallion looked over his shoulder.

What's that? he asked.

You'll have to get rid of a lifetime of bad habits. Advancing so much so fast has helped you a lot, but it has also pushed you deeper in a state of uncertainty.

You're starting to sound like Nil

The kid is right. You should listen to him more and rely on him less. The truth is that you've reached the point at which you can no longer advance your level, and it's starting to affect your life. If you really want to see this through any of your plans and dreams for that matter you need to stop running and face your fears.

I've heard the lecture before. If that's all you have to

Level up and tell Gloria and Eury about each other.

The sentence caught Dallion by surprise. For a split second, he felt completely defenseless, as if he had just finished fortifying his castle only to realize that his enemies were behind him all along.

When you manage to do that without feeling any anguish, you'll be able to say that you are willing to do what it takes, the guardian continued. No avoiding the matter, no waiting for things to resolve on their own, no running away to another city, hoping that you'll leave your problems behind that way. It's more difficult for you because of your empathy, and that's why you'll have to work that much harder to break through to your next level.

You've no idea what you're talking about, Dallion lied, putting up a fake laugh. The poison must have affected your mind.

Sure, that must be it. The dryad kept looking straight into Dallion's eyes. Wasn't that why you left your village? You could have stayed a while and helped improve the buildings. You could have helped find and unseal others who had lost their awakened powers. Instead, you rushed to Nerosal in search of a new start and now you don't even remember the reason you even got here.

Reality shifted, returning Dallion back to his room. He was breathing heavily, the heart in his chest beating so fast, forcing him to sit down.

*There's no need to get so excited, dear boy. Don't*

Dallion quickly slid on the blocker ring on his finger before Nil could finish. He didn't need more advice right now. In fact, he didn't need anyone. No one in this world knew him in the least. They didn't know what he had gone through in this world or on Earth. The only thing Dallion really needed was calm. Calm and sleep.

#### Chapter 224: Attempt at Sixteen

The day started as usual. At the crack of dawn, Dallion got up, checked the strands of hair he had placed at the window and door to make sure no one had entered, and did half an hour of real-world exercises as Vend had advised he do. For some yet unclear reason, doing while physical exercises didn't increase any stats, they allowed Dallion to build up stamina.

Following the exercises, Dallion went down to use the toilet, then washed up. Normally this would be the time that he'd back breakfast, but with neither Veil nor Gloria in the main room, Dallion decided to delay it for later. Strangely enough, Hannah wasn't there either. Normally she would be up about this time, doing what passed as administrative work, or prepping the place for the day. It was still a mystery why she didn't hire someone to do the cleaning for her with the money she had been making.

Back in his room, Dallion spent a moment improving his training dagger. At level eleven, the battlers had already become quite challenging. Using music was out of the question, since it had already reached the cap. Instead, Dallion had resorted to the second-best option Lux's flight and Nox's ability to crack armor. There was the option to use athletic skills and a dartbow instead, but that method was proving less and less reliable.

Copper, Dallion said once he was back in the real world. He had finally moved through the tin and bronze stages, reaching a third metal. Ironically, the improvement made the dagger less usable in

the real world than it had been before. Regardless, it was good practice in more ways than one. Dallion was able to gauge his skills, as well as see the stages of leveling up when it came to tin stilettos, at least.

Putting the weapon away, he sat on the bed. Hours remained until lunch. Even breakfast was about twenty minutes away. Veil had gotten into the habit of getting up late, and Gloria tended to stay in her room until he was ready.

Technically, there was nothing stopping Dallion from just going to her room, knocking on the door, and telling her about Eury. Actually, there were quite a few things wrong. Other than it being extremely awkward, he feared it might send mixed signals.

There was no harm in that, after all. Besides, it was only going to take a moment in the real world. Its not like anyone would notice?

While Dallion was thinking about it, his glance fell on the stone orchid. It had been a few days since he had played any music to it. Maybe he could do so now? Leaving it unattended wasn't such a good idea. And why not try out the ringchord? Dallion had literally never played it once since he had won it at the plaza. He definitely had to at some point and now was just as good a time as any

Five minutes later, Dallion was still sitting on the bed, planning what he'd do the rest of his day. Finally, that proved to be the wake-up call. As much as he didn't want to, he removed the blocker ring.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

The skill room formed around him. The presence of more walls made it appear even more bare. It was only the forging tools that gave the impression that Dallion was progressing in something. The Acrobatics section, on the other hand, left a whole lot to be desired.

*Oh. Sorry, Nil. I had a lot on my mind last night.*

*I know, and I was more than ready to discuss it with you. That is, if you're still interested. I went through the entire library with Gen to save you time and effort, but it seems you have other things on your mind.*

*Good! Does that mean you'll finally do something productive? Like at least attempt to level up? Remember that notion? Leveling up? Or is it something you consider below you now?*

Dallion wanted to say that wasn't the case, that he wanted to level up just as much as before. And in truth, he did. The problem was that he wanted to do it without doing the work. If there was a way to go to a level twenty awakening shrine, he would have gladly gone there. It was already established that such actions would only make things more difficult further on, but there, at level twenty, Dallion was certain that he would have the beans of dealing with them.

*You weren't wrong.*

At least not completely. Dallion still could feel a spark of desire deep inside. He just needed to wait for the right moment.

*Dal, have eternity at your disposal. Tell me, how much of it would be needed to get your thoughts together?*

That was a question that Dallion couldn't answer.

*The fact that you're delaying suggests that you're not ready, and maybe never will be. However, you being here at all says that you are. As the rectangles say, you are at a crossroads. It's up to you to decide what to do.*

It was up to Dallion to decide. In a way, it reminded him of the very first day he had woken up here. The room was completely empty back then. There wasn't even a door. Dallion had been asked to choose an attribute, then went down a small corridor where a shield and short sword were placed on different sections of the wall. That was the first choice he had made. The thought of remaining in the room wasn't even considered an option unlike now.

Should I stay or should I go? Dallion hummed to himself. Thinking about it, why not both?

Concentrating as hard as he could, Dallion split into two instances. One of the instances did nothing, but the other went out of the room. A new door had appeared in the corridor, located less than ten feet from the entrance to the library. That was the new expansion to Dallion's realm and his new leveling up challenge. Taking a deep breath, the instance of him opened the door and stepped inside. The moment that he did, the instance of Dallion in the starting room vanished.

**You are in the halls of destiny.**

**Defeat your hidden fears and shape your destiny.**

Here we go. Dallion smashed the rectangle away and kept on walking.

With each step, his mind created images of the possible opponents he would face. His grandfather and his original team from the time had already been defeated, which meant that there would be a different echo to face. His family was an option, as was the entire village of Dherma. Given the scale of the last test, it was more than possible. Would he end up facing his own mother and father? Given

how he had pretty much abandoned them, it was looking likely. The same went double for his younger brother. Nothing had prevented Dallion from writing to them he had the money and there were more than enough courier services in Nerosal that would do the job. However, it was fear that stopped him fear of his family responding.

Bright white lanterns appeared on each side of the corridor as Dallion walked on. After fifty feet, the corridor took a sharp turn to the right, then to the left again. Not long after, Dallion reached a doorway revealing a rather large chamber beyond.

Dallion didnt think of himself as lucky at all.

Unlike the previous cube, this one seemed a lot smaller and much better lit. Dallion was able to see the other side of it without problem. However, he wished that he couldnt. The walls of each wall were packed with houses, and now just any house these were the same houses that Dallion remembered from Dherma. It was as if someone had cut up the city in squares, then stuck them in the middle of a box. Dallions own house was visible on the wall to his left. Floating in the center, connected only through a series of bridges, was the chieftains mansion. It looked much more imposing than it had in reality, clearly showing that it was the most important structure there was the living heart of the village.

Lux, Dallion said.

Knowing what to do, the firebird appeared and took Dallion into the air. There was a faint chirp of disappointment that the realm he was summoned to was so small, but even so, the chick was happy to be with him again.

A single instant was needed to reach the entrance. No blocking enemies had appeared so far, making Dallion feel somewhat anxious. Clearly, this challenge was more puzzle than battlefield.

The door loomed five feet over him. Distinctly more massive than in the past, it appeared to be locked and bolted. Of course, thanks to Lux, Dallion could just go around the mansion and find another point of entry like a window, for example. However, since the puzzle was so obviously forcing him to find an alternative entrance, Dallion decided to settle with this one.

Several weaknesses in the metal of the frame became apparent. Despite its appearance, the mansion hadnt been kept in particularly good condition. Very much like the well. A series of targeting markers appeared all over the frame. They were soon joined by a second set of markers this time orange indicating the jumps and spins Dallion had to do to reach each of his targets.



Summoning the Nox dagger, Dallion leapt into action. His body spun and twisted in accordance with the suggested markers, allowing him to bounce off the wall as if there were footholds on it. As Dallion passed by a weak spot, a single strike from the dagger proved enough to crack the section of the frame. After a full sequence of acrobatic markers, the skills bonus kicked in. Dallion expected it to be something similar to the other basic skills: guard skills slowed down time, while attack skills allowed multiple attacks in a single instant. This one did none of that. What it did was to create a single disk-like marker floating in the air.

So thats air walking, Dallion thought. It had been described in some of the skill scrolls he had read in the ring library, but at the time Dallion had thought that to be a picturesque description rather than anything real. As it turned out, he had been wrong. In addition to all the other benefits the acrobatics skills provided, they also granted him the ability to walk on air one step at a time.

It took a total of three seconds for Dallion to strike all the weak points of the doorframe. When he did, the entire thing tilted forward then, fell to the ground, slamming like a fly swatter on a table. Dust filled the air for several moments, making it impossible to see anything beyond.

When the dust cleared, the inner garden of the mansion came into view along with a person standing there.

I knew you'd come for me, Dallion. Gloria rushed forward, giving him a warm hug. I've known it even since you improved my ring.

#### Chapter 225: If Words Can Kill

Gloria, Dallion said beneath his breath. So, this is the test I have to defeat you and everything you throw at me?

There was no indication that there was anyone else in the mansion. However, the awakened realms held more than just people or echoes. Any object or building could suddenly change from here, transforming into a guardian to fight on Gloria's behalf.

Come to think of it, it wasn't only people that Dallion had left behind, there were guardians as well. Dallion had no idea what most of them looked like, but he had seen the well, as well as the village guardian, to know they were tough to defeat.

Fight me? the echo of Gloria asked, amused. That defeats the purpose. Problems aren't just something you can punch away. You have to get to the core. If you can't do that, you're only fooling yourself that you're making progress.

No fighting? That was new. It also sounded easier than he thought.

Actually, what you do is up to you entirely, Gloria said.

What do you mean?

As Dallion voiced the question, the vibration in his voice became visible. This was the first time he had seen anything of the sort, even while using his music skills. Like a blade, the vibration shattered part of Gloria's emotions.

#### **MINOR HIT**

A red rectangle appeared as Gloria lost five percent of her health.

If words can kill, they usually will, Gloria said, the inkling of a tear forming in the corner of her left eye. In the awakened realms, at least.

This was the challenge? Anything Dallion said could potentially cause harm. The first thing Dallion thought of was to remain silent and not do anything. That was also risky. What if silence always was capable of hurting as well?

You can do and say anything you want to, Gloria walked closer to him. That is precisely what the point is. You can say things you know that would hurt me or you can remain silent and hope that doesnt. You still have to answer my questions, though.

Dallion remained petrified. He didnt expect this in the least. If this was a logical puzzle, he needed time to think about it. There had to be a solution to this. Fighting was out of the question maybe running away was the option? If he wasnt nearby, it wouldnt matter if he said something to hurt Gloria or not.

Do you love me, Dal? Gloria asked. Did you ever? Or am I just a prop to occupy your time?

Dallion took a step back. He could answer, but that would certainly cause harm. In an act of desperation, Dallion split, creating another instance of himself. In one of the instances, he remained silent, while in the other he said that he wasnt sure.

The words of that instant rang through the air, shattering a lot of Glorias internal feelings and taking thirty percent of her life with them.

High flight response had kicked in, desperately trying to avoid the confrontation. It was just like back on Earth. Things with Dallions first steady girlfriend hadnt turned out that good. There had been signs that things werent working out, but Dallion had persisted, fearing the breakup that he preferred to put up with the things he didnt like while not doing the things his girlfriend hated. At one point, it had gotten so bad that he secretly hoped that she would just leave and save him the trouble of dealing with formalizing the breakup. As it happened, she did, and while that had granted him momentary relief, the sadness of loss crept in a week later.

Youre just my fears, Dallion said firmly in an instance of himself. In his mind, he felt that if he could admit the truth and face up to it, all would

**MEDIUM HIT!**

**Dealt Damage is increased by 50%**

The red rectangle appeared mercilessly in both instances.

What?

Sometimes thoughts can hurt as well. A tear trickled down Glorias cheek. She was still smiling, though, making the whole scene all the more painful for Dallion. Why is it so difficult to give an answer?

It was a cliché to say that giving an answer would hurt Dallion more than it would hurt her, but it happened to be true. A while back, before his decision to face the village chief, Dallion had said he

was greedy, and he wanted to keep all his friends. That was something he meant in the very literal sense in the world. Defeating an obvious enemy was far easier and less painful than having to do something that would make friends go away. Often they still did, but in Dallions mind they also hadn't. It was a sort of Schrodinger's cat situation which provided him with just enough security to keep him from hurting.

## **MINOR WOUND**

### **Your health has been decreased by 5%**

The moment the rectangle appeared, Dallion knew the reason for it. Thoughts were just concepts and in his awakened realm, they too had physical form. In this case they were invisible, unavoidable daggers that he pinned in himself. This was definitely going to be a fun challenge.

You know I can't answer you, Dallion said. To his surprise, no further rectangles appeared. It would be easy to lie or to use music to pass the trial, but I won't. That's not the point of this.

Are you sure it'll work? Gloria tilted her head. As I said, you're free to do anything you want. You can even fight me if you wish. If you really think I'm just an echo, then it should be an easy win for you. But you don't think that, do you?

Dallion looked straight into her eyes. Like the echo of his grandfather, she knew everything about Dallion that he himself knew about himself. Rather, she knew what he thought he knew about himself. If the fight with his grandfather had shown him something, it was that speculation also gained form in this realm.

I'm not sure what to think, Dallion lied.

You're lying. Gloria slid her hand along his shoulder. But it's okay. I know the truth, and that's something you can't deny even to yourself.

And what truth would that be? a familiar voice asked behind Dallion. Turning around, he saw the thing he feared the most in the current situation Euryale.

The gorgon was dressed in her adventure outfit, as if to reinforce the contrast between her and Gloria: one was a princess or the close equivalent of one locked away in a castle like mansion; the other was a wilderness hunter. And Dallion didn't want to hurt either of them.

In theory, Eury could be considered tough enough not to be harmed by a few words at least in Dallion's mind, but he still didn't want to take the risk.

What truth, Dal? the gorgon pressed on. Is there anything going on between you and this blondie?

The insult match had just started. The only positive thing was that insults didn't seem to cause damage. That could be considered as a semi-win of sorts.

Hey, Eury. Dallion smiled as best he could. We're from the same village. I've known Gloria and her brother for years. He was very careful to add the word brother in there just to be on the same side.

## **MINOR HIT**

A red rectangle appeared above Gloria. Clearly, she didn't like the way she had been described.

Actually, he gave me a ring, Gloria said in gloating fashion, staring at the gorgon.

Is that right? the gorgon crossed her arms. Care to elaborate on that, Dal?

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been decreased by 5%**

Dallion wit while true that it had helped Dallion on several occasions, the entire problem now was that he was Dallion. If he were someone else, things would have been much better. The urge to quick the challenge and leave it for another day became stronger. However, he wasnt even sure that it would help either. If thoughts could cause harm, leaving them both could as well. Then again, at least he wouldnt be there to see it happen.

## **MEDIUM HIT!**

**Dealt Damage is increased by 50%**

Red rectangles appeared above both Eury and Glorias heads. So much for that idea.

I care about both of you! Dallion said as his stress grew. Just in different ways.

Both looked at each other. There were no red rectangles, no insults, just eagerness emanating from both of them, waiting to hear how he would continue.

If this were a game or puzzle, there would be one solution. However, it was closer to real life than any game. The feelings of the echoes were real, as were their reactions. There was no dialogue tree Dallion could navigate through, even if he used his splitting ability. What was the solution, though? Back on Earth it was said that the truth was the best solutionat least then Dallion wouldnt have anything to be guilty of. But that wasnt always true. Dallion had almost lost friendships because of telling the truth. There simply was no way of knowing.

We were close with Gloria in Dherma because both of us wanted to break free from her grandfathers rule, Dallion went on. For a moment, he was tempted to add the clich that he thought of her as a sister, but decided not to push his luck. I didnt think shed come to Nerosal, not with her fear of cities. Not that I wasnt glad to see her, he quickly added. Just surprised.

There was a short moment of silence. So far, so good. Nothing bad had happened, and he was still given the option to talk. Dallion took a deep breath. It was all or nothing now.

Gloria, this is Euryale, he said slowly, as if hoping that stretching the words would make him calmer. Eury is a thread-smith and a hunter. She made the armor Im wearing and also helped me out on several occasions. Dallion had to make another pause. His pulse had doubled at least. Shes also

Two words. That was all he needed to say. On a purely objective level, it wasnt supposed to be that difficult. He had already made sure there was no turning back, so he might go all the way. Still, what was the proper word to use? Girlfriend? Lover? Fianc?

Shes also my girlfriend, he said at last and braced for rectangles.

## **MEDIUM HIT!**

**Dealt Damage is increased by 50%**

A rectangle appeared above Gloria, as Dallion feared it would. Normally, this would be the point at which to consider the next action. For worse, Gloria didn't give him such an option.

Maybe, the blonde said, bitterness replacing all other emotions in her. I should have come to Nerosal sooner. I'm here now, though, and I plan to fix things.

Bladebows appeared in Gloria's hands and quickly pointed at Euryale. The action was fast, but Dallion turned out faster, jumping in the way of the bolts before they were fired.

Shield, Dallion shouted as Gloria pressed the triggers.

The shield extended instantly before both projectiles hit it, bouncing off and pushing him backwards in the process. This was stronger than an attack should be. Either Gloria's weapons were special, or this was another peculiarity of the leveling up trial.

Good choice, Euryale said, summoning her claw gauntlets. You're not even worth turning into a statue.

Dallion got pushed away as the two women prepared to get into a fight.

Dallion didn't even bother replying, quickly jumping to his feet. At this point, there was no doubt that the two echoes would fight until one of them was destroyed and Dallion had no intention of letting it happen.

Chapter 226: The Choice

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been decreased by 5%**

A bolt grazed Dallion as he tried to block its path. That was a good thing: wounds such as these would be healed by Lux in a matter of seconds, and more importantly, the bolt failed to hit its intended target.

The fight between Euryale and Gloria had intensified quite a bit, to the point that Dallion was forced to use all his available skillscombat splitting includedto prevent them from killing each other. That also meant taking most of their damage on himself. Even so, the wounds he was getting were starting to become more and more serious. Soon there would come a point at which even Lux wouldn't be able to help him. What's more, his actions had also started having an effect on the echoes as well.

Why do you keep protecting her? Gloria asked. She's just a replacement. You only got to know her because I wasn't there. I'm here now. Or do you wish I wasn't?

No, it's not like that, Dallion said. Part of him was already annoyed with himself about resorting to such responses. It wasn't that he didn't know how to respond, it was the only way he could without risking harming them.

You fell in love with someone you've only been with for a month? Face it, it was always supposed to be a one-night stand. Just look at her. Do you think she cares about you?

Just what a girl would say, Eury said, then split into three instances. Each of them went past Dallion and attacked Gloria directly.

Dallion reacted without hesitation, creating three instances of his own and having them block each of Eurys attacks. The gorgon was only using melee combat, but that was more than enough to cause considerable difficulties. There was no doubt that, left to her own devices, she would easily rip Gloria to shreds. Not that the bladebows made things much better for Dallion.

Nox, get ready, Dallion thought, as he slashed at the claws of Eurys gauntlet. The attack was only partially successful, with three of the claws falling off.

If he wasnt protecting you youd be already gone, Eury said. Not that youre worth it. Seriously, Dal, why do you keep protecting a useless doll? Shes just using you. You know that youll never get lucky with her. If she was serious about you, shed have done something about it. Shes just stringing you along.

Not as much as hes stringing me, Gloria countered. If he was really into you, hed have no problems telling me about it.

A pair of bolts split the air, passing by Dallion on their way to Eury. For some reason, the gorgon didnt split to safety, taking a hit in the shoulder. This was the first time she had received damage in battle, but she was already at fifty percent health because of it.

Moments later, two more bolts were on their way. It was Dallions turn to react again, but this time he decided on a new approach. Moving between the bolts and Eury as before, he made sure to complete a full guard sequence to slow down time. It didnt end there, though. Dallion continued with his guard skill, completing sequence after sequence until time stopped completely.

Dallion didnt reply. He knew it perfectly well. The reason for the pause was to give him some time to think in peace without having to protect Euryale and Gloria from each other. He still had to be careful, though. Thoughts still had the ability to harm, even with time stopped completely.

Up till now, it was always defeating his opponents one way or another. This one felt different, though. Dallion had been given way too many advantages. If he wanted, he could defeat either of them just by talking, but was that the point? Every fiber of his body screamed no.

What was he supposed to do? Make a choice? That sounded logical, but it also felt to be the easy way out. Dallion didnt want to lose anyone.

When he was a child back on Earth, he wanted all his friends to get along well with one another. Often that involved mediating between them, lying if needed, in order to try to get them to warm up to one another. So far that had never worked out, resulting in both of them walking out on him. Some did it quickly, others remained lingering on for years, before moving to other friends. It had been the same with romantic relations.

As Dallion matured, he had come to the realization that it was impossible to have his friends always like one another. Instead, he was content with them liking him and not fighting in front of him. That made things simpler and more bearable. That was the reason he had started running away. It was a sort of defense mechanism, although Dallion thought he had grown enough to handle such situations. Clearly, that wasnt the case. Thinking about it, it should have been obvious on the first

day when Gloria returned. The fact that he felt some deep discomfort, even fear at the thought of having her and Euryale at the same place at the same time, should have made it obvious. However, Dallion had been too stubborn to admit it, using work and other developments as an excuse. Well, now he had no choice, if he was going to breathe through his next barrier, he'd have to find a way through this. The problem was that he had no idea how.

So far, everyone had insisted that he had to make a choice. Maybe that's the correct thing to do. Maybe it was what was expected from him, but they weren't him. As the dryad had said, Dallion was an empath, and that made the world a whole different place for him.

*Even echoes have limitations. I have your thoughts, but not your stats. Do you think you can pull it off?*

*I don't know. Sounds like running away, just in a more creative fashion.*

*What's left then? I can't reason with them, I've tried.*

Reasoning, as it turned out, also caused damage.

*They aren't my enemies. Besides, it only works some of the time.*

*It worked on me.*

The notion gave Dallion pause. That was true. When fighting the echo of his grandfather, there was no reason for him to spare it. Instead, he had transformed it into his first full-time echo. If that was possible then, why wouldn't it be possible now as well? There was one difference, though there were three sides in this conflict, all of which had to come to an agreement for a draw to work.

*It's difficult to say. Approximately ninety percent don't reach the requirements for passing the third gate. I have no idea how many give up at your level. Not that it matters. There are different flaws for different people.*

That was what being a double digit awakened was all about: eliminating one's flaws in order to continue further on. It was supposed to be challenging to the extreme both on a physical and mental level. However, there was a way forward. All Dallion had to do was find it.

Something that Veil said came to mind. Back when Dallion had defeated Aspion's limiting echo, he had shared this with the Luors. Veil had responded that the echo wasn't an issue since he had beaten him up to do what he wanted. At the time, Dallion hadn't given it much thought. However, there was one glaring problem: echoes only had enough health to exist. There shouldn't have been a way for Veil to have beaten up the echo, since one punch would have been enough to destroy it. And still,

the blond wasn't the sort of person who would lie about something of the sort. That meant that there was a way to subdue someone without dealing damage.

A new set of markers appeared. While still red, these were different from the standard attack markers. They displayed holds and direction arrows. In a way, they had shared a lot of characteristics with the athletic markers. More than likely, this was another combination.

*I know, but at least there's a chance*

.

Returning to normal, Dallion went back into the fight, focusing on Gloria. While counterintuitive, he preferred not to have to deal with ranged weapons later on. The main thing was to still not attack, just use Gloria's own momentum against her in a purely defensive fashion.

You're taking her side? Gloria asked in shock. Surprisingly there was no red rectangle this time.

I'm taking my own side, Dallion said. And that means using whatever strength I have to keep you two from hurting yourselves.

You mean each other, Eury corrected.

Continuing his action, Dallion managed to grab hold of one of Gloria's bladebows. Alas for him, the weapon disappeared before he could get a good grip on it. This meant she could still summon it at will. Even so, his action was mostly successful.

Not expecting to have to defend herself, Gloria made a sloppy attempt to pull away by making a high acrobatic leap. However, she no longer was the only one capable of that skill. Leaping up alongside her, Dallion grabbed her other hand, forcing her to unsummon the second weapon as well.

You know I like you, he said. But you also know I love Eury.

No, you don't, she replied, the features of her face distorting as a sense of betrayal rang throughout her body. You just think so.

Maybe you're right, but that's for me to find out. I'm sorry I didn't tell you right away, but I was scared I might lose you.

And you were right too. Choosing that thing is the same as killing me, so you might as well just do it. The betrayal slowly started shifting to regret. If that's your choice.

It's not my choice.

No attacks followed while the two fell back to the ground. Neither Gloria nor Eury even made an attempt.

You want us to remain friends? Gloria's laugh was full of bitterness and mockery.

I want us to remain as we were, and I think so do you, Dallion continued. The real you, not the echo my mind created of you. Until I awakened, you barely knew I existed. That's something we can't change, but after that we did well together. I just don't think either of us thinks we're meant to be together.



There was a long moment of silence. Dallion knew that Euryale was also there, standing a few steps away, but he didn't turn to look towards her. Not yet. If she were to take advantage of the situation and attack, then he'd respond best he could. Until then, all his focus was on Gloria.

You had a crush on me, didn't you? Gloria ventured a smile.

I'm not sure. Maybe. You were nice to me, so I thought I did

And I was the only girl your age who was awakened.

As much as he didn't want to admit it, that much was true. Had Dallion remained in Dherma, maybe something would have happened, though it didn't sound like it would have worked out either way. Choosing due to lack of options was no choice at all.

Are you sure she's worth it? Gloria asked. What if she drops you when you tell her about me?

I'm hoping that won't happen. But if it does, I'll figure it out somehow

At the end of the day, that's what life was for. Dallion was just done refusing to accept reality. As his parents used to say after Dallion went through some major disappointment as a child, life goes on the important thing was to know what to do with it. He was still going to do everything in his power, to keep Gloria as a friend, but he had his life and she had hers.

## **MAJOR HEAL**

### **GLORIA's health has been increased by 50%**

#### **Chapter 227: A Close Friend**

Just when a sense of relief started to form, he felt Eury's gauntlet on his shoulder. This wasn't particularly good. Slowly turning around his muscles only to confirm what he already suspected.

You know the calm tone with which the gorgon began only made Dallion even tenser. You're lucky I don't hit men unprovoked.

Thanks? That was the only thing that Dallion could think of. Apparently, it wasn't the correct response, for he saw the anger in the gorgon grow.

A childhood sweetheart? And you didn't tell me about it? The snakes on Euryale's head moved about, even they seemed ticked.

## **MINOR HIT**

A red rectangle appeared above the gorgon. Thoughts still had the power to hurt, and so far Dallion wasn't going a good job of it.

The firebird hopped from him onto Euryale, covering her with a layer of blue flames. As much as that would help her physical damage, it didn't seem to have decreased the emotional one. Real life really was messy, especially when Dallion forced himself not to run away. A dull ache appeared in his temples as he tried to think of a solution to this.

He knew what he was supposed to say, but he knew what the consequences might be if he did: he had already put one romantic relation to rest, be it a misconceived one. There was every chance that this might cause him and Eury to break up and that was going to be painful. The mere thought filled him with a bitter sensation of loss and regret.

Nothing to say? The gorgon crossed her arms.

Were good together, Dallion said, the words sticking to his throat. I think I love you.

That was the worst combination of words if there ever was one, but for better or worse, it represented the truth. This wasn't the first time Dallion was convinced he was in love with someone. Throughout high school, it had turned out to be a fling; he was at the right place at the right time, as the saying went.

Think? A pebble of pain appeared in the gorgon's body. On the surface, she didn't show it, but it was clear she was hurting as well. Your opinion of me is really low.

Memories of advice given throughout the years came back to him. There were many ways of war and fighting and in order to make it far, Dallion had to find a way to become victorious on more arenas than one. Physical, emotional, and intellectual he had to master all fields. He had already made progress on the physical front, was arguably okay on the intellectual level, as far as tactics were concerned, at least. The emotional, though, was a different matter entirely. Avoiding conflicts, he had never trained himself for a fight there, and it was showing. To think he used to laugh at people who stressed out talking on the phone or in front of crowds, while he had a similar problem all along, just better hidden.

I was afraid of what might happen, he said, calm returning to him. I didn't feel I did anything to earn the attention I received. From you, from Gloria, from everyone else. That's why I always feared that what came suddenly could just as easily vanish as well.

The gorgon's anger started to diminish. In a matter of seconds, it was the size of a grape, then a pea.

I know I can lose you Dallion looked over his shoulder at Gloria. Both of you. I've always known, and that's why I tried to keep the bubbles of reality apart, so as not to ruin the perfect things I had. In the past, I'd been hurt many times or so I thought. The thing is, it was all in my head. I never remained long enough to experience real pain, and maybe I should have. The thing is, I like the way things turned out and I want them to continue like that in the real world. I want this to work out. He turned back to the gorgon. And I want to keep you as a friend. Being greedy I'm hoping that you two will end up being friends as well.

So, you want the same things you did when you came here? Eury said, somewhat unconvinced.

Yeah. Dallion smiled. But I'm not counting them to be a given. I've been very lucky, but you don't owe me anything, no one does. The only thing I could do is to fight for what I have and hope it's enough.

**MAJOR HEAL**

**EURYALEs health has been increased by 50%**

You really have grown. The gorgon smiled, giving Dallion a friendly punch in the shoulder. What if we had continued fighting? Would you have taken a side?

Most likely not. But if you had tried to kill each other, I would have stood in-between.

Isn't that sweet, Gloria chuckled. You might still have to, though. This is your realm, but things are different on the outside.

I know. Things are beyond my control, but that doesn't mean I have to run away.

**You have broken through your barrier.**

**Your level has increased to 16.**

**Choose the focus that will serve you best.**

The blue rectangle appeared. For a moment Dallion wondered whether he should say something else to Eury or Gloria. He knew they weren't real, but now that the challenge was over, he was grateful to them for the talk. It was tempting to want to have them remain as echoes, but Dallion was fully aware that would be pointless. After all, they weren't people, just perceptions of such given form. Having them remain was no different from having a few mirrors in a room and calling it a party.

*Oh?*

*So it was the right choice?*

*It's always the right choice as long as the Moons let you go on. Is it a good choice or a moral choice? Well, that's for a much larger conversation. Personally, I think it was, but I'm not you, nor am I a Moon.*

After some hesitation, Dallion chose to increase his mind again to twelve. Splitting was his greatest asset right now. Everything else could wait, or rely on achievements.

The challenge complete, Dallion remained silent in the copy of the village chief's mansion for a while. He had no idea how much time he had spent reminiscing. It was Lux that brought him back to reality. Bored with doing nothing, the bird was pestering to look around.

Just a minute, Lux, Dallion said as the bird shoved into him with its fiery body. Okay, okay. You can fly about. Just take Nox with you.

In contrast, the crackling didn't seem to appreciate the notion in the least. Nonetheless, the cub appeared, made an audible sigh, taking on the role of a duty-bound older brother, and let Lux grab him.

Due to the many times Lux had to carry people, he had developed the skill to almost merge with the entity he would help fly, giving it a pair of blue, flaming wings. Looking at Nox, Dallion wished he still had his Earth phone so he could take a selfie of himself.

Try to find anything hidden, he shouted. Ill look around here.

After another few minutes of reflection, Dallion did just that. The search started in the obvious places: the main hall, the basement, and village chiefs room. Normally, those would be great places to have things. The problem was that the mansion only reflected what Dallion remembered it, and he hadnt been in a lot of it. Half the rooms that existed now were just speculation on his part, and trying to think up a treasure room was no help in the least.

Thankfully, it was Nox again who found the discrepancy. Ironically, it was in the very well that Dallion had helped repair. After having Lux pick him up and then drop him to the bottom of the well, Dallion easily managed to find the small iron box hidden in the wells wall. Using the Nox dagger to loosen in, Dallion then removed the lid.

**You have found the hidden reward and shall be rewarded.**

**Smash the window to see what gift the Seven have granted you.**

The message was the same as last time. Given that the puzzle was far more emotionally taxing, Dallion expected the reward to be greater, although one could never tell with the realms. As Nil had said, it could be anything from a new skill to a design of a simple dagger. Last time Dallion had gained five points for his ??? stata stat he still didnt know what it was.

Lets see what youve got for me now, Dallion said, and punched the rectangle.

**Paradox Cube Reward**

**You have increased your ??? stat by 5**

Seriously? Dallion had never felt so happy and annoyed at the same time. On the one hand, getting a five-point reward was huge. Now he was much closer to finding what that attribute was. At the same time, it diluted his focus. With four levels left to the next awakening gate, Dallion could get his perception to twenty, the mystery one. At the same time, he also needed to increase his mind as much as possible.

*No, I think I have to take care of a few things Ive been neglecting. Maybe its time to make my realm a bit more hospitable, have a quick chat in person with Harp, and yourself. Possibly check out the things the limiting echo tried to do while here. But before that, I have to go see a few people in the real world.*

The realm disappeared, and Dallion found himself back in his room. He had a notion that a lot of time had passed, but this time the sensation was slightly different as if he was having a déjà vu.

*Its your realm. You can always change it later.*

That sounded very much like something Dallion would say. Even so, it was better than nothing. At the end of the day, if one couldnt trust oneself, who could they trust?

Leaving all his gear except the Nox dagger, Dallion went straight for Glorias room. A few minutes ago he would have taken several deep breaths, hesitating whether to knock or not. Right now, all that fear and hesitation was no more.

Gloria, Dallion said, knocking on the door. You up?

Im half naked, the reply came from inside. She was clearly not happy with his timing.

Put something on and lets go. I want you to meet someone.

Didnt you use to sleep until noon?

No, thats your brother. Now, come on. Get ready, Ill go get a bite while youre done.

And who is so important that you have to completely ruin my day?

A close friend of mine. Youll like her. Shes a gorgon.

#### Chapter 228: More than a Coincidence

Gorgons werent morning creatures at least that was the conclusion one could come to in Nerosal, since there was only one gorgon and she tended to go to bed roughly at the same time that others woke up. The forging communities frowned at the practice, the artistic circles applauded them, and since Euryale was part of both, she received the benefit of the doubt on all sides. The only thing that she was not allowed to do and only because she hadnt bothered to buy a workshop of her own was to forge into the night.

Initially, Dallion wanted to introduce Euryale as his girlfriend upon arriving at the workshop itself. Gloria, however, had successfully nagged him into sharing ten steps after exiting the inn. Her reaction was definitely not what Dallion had imagined.

Really? Gloria asked, with enough doubt in her voice to sink an oil tanker.

Yeah, Dallion replied for the third time. Why is it so difficult to believe? In fact, her doubt was starting to annoy him slightly.

Youve only been gone a few months and youre already in a relationship with a hunter? Gloria gave him the look. Anyone will find it hard to believe. Not to mention that shes the only gorgon in the city.

There arent that many furies either, but

Youre not in a relationship with a fury, are you?

Seeing the futility of the argument, Dallion decided to quit for the moment. Thankfully, Gloria had the good sense to make a pause with the questions as well.

The number of people staring at them steadily increased the further away they went from their neighborhood. By the time they got to Euryales workshop, close to a dozen artists had requested that they draw a portrait of Gloria, to which she had responded with the chill reserved for strangers.

The way she did it was so close to an actual noble, that the greater part of the artists quickly left with an apology.

You have to teach me that trick one day, Dallion semi-joked.

It wont work for you. Youre not a Luor.

That was a strange thing to say. Dallions grandfather had been the village chief before the Luors. There probably was more to the story than that. For one thing, the person who had cursed them and placed the chain-mail echo in Aspions awakening realm had almost certainly been a noble. Dallion had seen quite a few awakened in their twenties lately and none of them seemed capable of having such echo powers.

Maybe one day Ill become even more, Dallion whispered. At some point, his grandfather had said that to Aspion. Anyway, thats it. Dallion pointed at the entrance.

After a single long look, Dallion could tell that Gloria was far from impressed. Her motions were virtually screaming disappointment, but politeness kept her from voicing her thoughts.

Whats with the statues? she asked, diplomatically changing the topic.

Im not sure, Dallion replied. Just ignore them.

Reaching the door, he knocked out of common courtesy, thenwhen he didnt get any answerknocked again and opened a crack.

Eury? he asked in his normal voice. With her perception, it was more than likely she had heard him. Eury, are you still awake?

I am now, came the response from the bedroom. There was a hint of annoyance, but on the whole, the gorgon didnt sound too upset from what Dallion could tell.

Yeah, sorry about that. I wanted to catch you before you went to bed. Want to introduce you to someone.

You always pick the worst time Give me a minute, Ill be right up.

That means things are okay, Dallion whispered to Gloria, who gave him a critical look. Already she was displaying signs of nervousness. Given her high opinion of hunters, she probably was slightly star-struck.

It didnt take long for Euryale to join them. Both visitors had heard her stand up from her bed and slip something on with the least amount of effort. Dallion had expected it to be a robe. Instead, it turned out to be a pair of britches and a shirt of some sort.

Hey, the gorgon said with a yawn, her snakes focusing on Dallion and the other visitor. Youre Gloria, right?

Dallion felt a momentary chill in his stomach.

Thats right, Gloria replied, more nervous than she should be. How did you know?

Your brother told me about you when he was here yesterday. That and I doubt there are too many pure blondes in Nerosal who are friends with Dallion. Although with him, you can never tell. He can be secretive when he wants to, she passed by, giving Dallion a beck on the cheek.

That much is true. He told me that youre a hunter.

A very tired hunter. Im usually in bed at this time. So, what do you two need?

Shes usually more fun when shes awake, Dallion said, earning him a tap on the back of the head. I just wanted to finally get you two to meet. With everything going on Ive been delaying this for ages, so though theres no time like the present. Besides, how could I not introduce my fianc to my childhood friend?

As he spoke, Dallion added a few subtle touches of acceptance and calm, just to be on the safe side. About a quarter of Eurys snakes moved in his direction while a mixture of joy and embarrassment rang from her.

Youre sweet, she said with a second yawn. And shes cute. You and your brother better be careful while youre here. With the festival approaching, the amount of attention youll get will be crazy.

Ill keep that in mind. There was a short pause. Dal told me youre a thread forger.

Definitely. Though a bit pricey. She yawned again. Just tell me what you want when Im fully awake and Ill give you a price and time. Realm or real world?

Real world. Gloria glanced briefly towards Dallion. Well talk later today. Lets go, Dal.

Hold a bit, Dallion protested. Ive got something to ask as well.

The blonde gave Dallion a warning glance, letting him know he should be somewhat more understanding. One thing about awakened with the exception of Dallion was that they were very protective of their sleep. From what Dallion could tell, it didnt have to do with endurance or level. People in this world just were very cranky if they got their real-world sleep interrupted. Nil had tried to get Dallion to learn those values when he had started tutoring him, but quickly gave up. Even magic could do little to change a gamers sleep habits.

Ill wait for you outside, Gloria said after a while, hinting that Dallion should just leave with her. Despite that, he didnt.

Childhood sweetheart? Eury asked once the door closed behind Gloria.

Not really. Enemies turned friends, sort of. Its complicated. Ill tell you about it someday. Right now, I want to ask you if youre heard about something called Vermilion.

If the answer made a few snakes on Eurys head to stir, the name got tenfold the reaction.

Where did you hear that? Her tone was calm, but Dallion felt seeds of fear sprouting within her.

I was asked to do a job for the mirror pool. It involved facing a guardian

Are you an idiot?! This was the first time Dallion had seen Eury shout, and judging by her emotions, she meant it. We made a deal so that you wouldnt get involved with the pool, and you jump into the lions den on your own?

It wasnt because I wanted to! Dallion did his best to remain calm, fighting not to snap back at her on instinct. They threatened Gloria. If I didnt do what they asked, things would have gone badly for her. Possibly for Veil as well.

For several seconds, no one said anything. Then the gorgon shook her head.

Dal youre too nave for your own good. If things worked like that, do you think people would bother making deals?

*Some of us tried to warn you, dear boy.*

If I had refused, nothing would have happened, would it? he asked.

No. Theres one thing about hunters: if you cross one, you cross them all. Youre not a hunter yet, so you dont count. They asked you to do something for them and you agreed. If they tried to use force Eury left the sentence hanging.

Either way, I face that thing. It was different from all the other guardians Id thought.

Its supposed to be. Those things are ancient. We think that they used to protect treasures back in the day, but now theyre just broken guardians like all the rest. What was the item it was in?

A one level spheric ring. The thing is, I think that it was the one that caused awakened to get sick or die. If I hadnt been lucky, the same would have happened to me.

I doubt it. Named guardians can do nasty things, but Vermillion isnt that special. Also, bad things have been happening to explorers way months before he came to Nerosal.

Dallions eyes widened.

I brought him here, Eury clarified. Part of the deal to keep you safe. I warned them he was trouble, but leave it to the pool not to believe anyone.

That sounded about right. With the amount of lies the members of the mirror pool were weaving, they would never believe anything someone said. Quite possibly, they had forgotten what the word really meant. To risk the lives of so many awakened, though, that was outright monstrous.

Thats not the thing I wanted to talk to you about. Dallion swallowed. After the guardian was defeated, he said that a copyette was on the loose Possibly in Nerosal.

The gorgon became perfectly still, only a few of the snakes on the head moving slightly. Sensing that she wanted him to continue, Dallion went on.

From what I understood, he must have been in a prison of sorts and Vermilion was guarding him not very well by the sound of it. Do you know any way to tell if someones a copyette?

Fire, the gorgon replied. The easiest way to determine is fire. It hurts copyettes more than anything else, also it never leaves a mark behind.

Cant they just make a wound?

They could, with experience, but youll be able to tell that theres something wrong with it.



As much as Dallion didnt appreciate the butting in, especially since the echo had mentioned numerous times that he wasnt an expert in non-human history, he had to admit the glaring problem of Eurys method. Setting a few nobles on fire in the hopes that they would turn out to be a copyette was a quick way to end up dead.

I was told that a kaleidervisto can also help to find a copyette. Is that true?

it is, but theyre not easy to come by. They had a few other uses as well and those who have them arent willing to give them up. Ill try to find you one, but until then, youll have to rely on the fire. Just keep your eyes open and dont tell anyone else about this.

I know. Apart from my gear, youre the only one that knows. Well, and the mirror pool.

Ill have a chat with them.

That was her hint that the conversation was coming to an end.

One last thing. When I fulfilled the rings destiny, it changed into a key. Any idea what it might be for?

Key rings seem to have been common ages ago. This isnt the first such item Ive found. In most cases, they just open jewelry boxes of the like. This might be nothing more than a coincidence.

Do you think it is?

The snakes on the gorgons head moved about.

No, she said.

## Chapter 229: Festival Tournament Challenge

With the stumbling block removed in Dallions awakened realm, things started moving much faster. For starters, Dallion went back to doing exploration missions. With the demand for artifact leveling increasing, and sanitation being out of the question, Dallion went back to his standard routine. Unexpectedly, he felt that he had a lot more time now, while adding a few items to his daily schedule.

Euryale had become a big part of his life, though sadly, for the most part, they saw each other in the awakened realms. Real life dates were a luxury the gorgon couldnt afford, due toamong other things the increase of awakened curses. Nil continued to claim that there was nothing out of the ordinary. Math seemed to be on his side, especially since the number of artifacts that needed to be cleared doubled every week. The echos theory was that everyone was preparing for the festival, when nobles, guilds, and traders alike would do their best to sell off the upgraded items at exorbitant prices. Whether that was the case, Dallion had no idea. One thing was for certain the Icepicker stocks were getting low.

Dallion had made several attempts to buy a kaleidervisto, but there never seemed to be any. For that matter, there werent any particularly useful artifacts either. Fighting against his instinct, Dallion had even asked Falkner if he could procure one, but the kid had shaken his head in his usual depressed

way before walking away. It was pretty common knowledge that he was strongly discouraged from getting close to Gloria, and was taking it hard. The only focus, as Bel had shared, was for him to prepare for his second gate trial. Apparently, his father had insisted that he reach level fifteen at the time of the festival.

March was also acting somewhat out of character. After trying unsuccessfully to get to see her, Dallion had learned from Nil that the captain had stopped world exploration for a month. The whole thing was kept very hush-hush, but apparently the order had come from the guild master himself. While somewhat disappointed, Dallion also felt relieved. Now he wouldn't have to rush to level up before entering the world. If there was one thing that he and everyone in the know agreed on, it was that he still wasn't completely ready to join in a world expedition, even as a packrat.

For the most part, that allowed Dallion to devote more attention to his gear, also echoes and familiars as well as continue with his forging training. At present, Dallion once more considered his decision not to choose basic metal forging to be the correct one. Knowing what he was like in the past would have guaranteed he'd skip the basics once more and only later have to do something about it.

Seventeen attempts, spread within three real time days, proved to be enough to have Dallion successfully create his ten ingots. And while he didn't get any achievement as a reward, he had obtained the ability to summon ingots in his realm at will. Overjoyed with the success, Dallion had quickly bragged to Eury, who had found half a real-life day to teach him the basics of a few other common metals. The same evening, Dallion had four more types of ingots to train on, with the promise to move to silver and gold afterwards.

Training with Vend also went surprisingly well. Free from some of his flaws, Dallion was able to split much better. The slight increase in mind also helped, making Vend up the training and start sharing some new tricks.

This is impossible! Dallion groaned, lying on the floor of Vends training realm. His head was thumping to the point he felt it would crack open. There's no way.

If it were easy anyone would do it, Vend sat next to him. Also, it's your fault for having familiars.

Supposedly, that had to be kept a secret. If so, the guild had done a pretty poor job, since there wasn't an awakened in Nerosal that didn't know. The Flameforge guild had made several more attempts to recruit him, as had another of the top five guilds. And even quite a few Icepickers had inquired if Dallion could let them borrow Lux during their missions, just in case. Thankfully, next to no one knew about Nox for the moment.

They have a mind of their own, Dallion said. I say the same things and they do something completely different.

There's your problem. You're not saying it the same way.

The task that Dallion was supposed to do was splitting and having his familiars follow complex instructions in each of his instances. During the previous fights that had worked pretty well: Dallion had easily instructed Lux where to go in a few instances and the firebird had obeyed. However, as the instructions gained complexity, and involved the familiars spending time away from Dallion, the results became more and more chaotic.

Think of familiars as gear that you don't hold, Vend said.

You told me that dartbow bolts cannot be affected by instances, Dallion countered.

You're not linked to your bolts. Grains of shame and dishonesty appeared throughout Vends chest, all too miscible to Dallions music skill. The elite had been caught giving a bad example and didn't want to admit it.

Familiars are supposed to be part of you by nature, Vend continued. The difference is that they are a bit temperamental. Yours especially. As long as you train them to do as you instruct, you should be able to achieve the outcome you desire.

I'll give it another try, Dallion stood up.

The pain in his head was still there, but he created two more instances of himself, nonetheless. In each of the three cases, he ordered Lux to do something different. There were no targets, no clear points of reference, just a general instruction for the firebird to scout forward. In one of the instances, the bird hesitated. In the other two it went forward immediately, following almost the exact same path until one instance decided to circle back and check on Dallion.

Nope, Dallion said, and chose that instancethis way he wouldn't have to wait for Lux to return. Not happening.

Well, thats your task. Keep on trying until you get them to do what you want.

Easy for you to say, Dallion grumbled beneath his breath. Even so, he did pet his familiar.

How are you doing with your stiletto training? Vend asked. What level is it at now?

Fifteen. The battles there had become exceedingly difficult to the point that Dallion had to use every skill and ability in his arsenal to achieve a victory. So far, that had resulted in the weapon gaining some silver content. The way things are going, it didnt look like he was going to get to pure silver anytime soon. Might take a while to get it to the next level.

Dont rush it. And dont use it in battle.

No chance of that happening. How far am I supposed to go again?

As far as you can, Vend replied. If you ever get to a point, youre fulfilled its destiny let me know so I take some notes.

Funny. It seemed that no one had reached that level. Anything else? No new area missions I must do?

No, youre good. Just keep on prepping and be ready. A sound of deceit flashed within Vend for a moment, before instantly disappearing again. We might start the expedition soon.

Just dont push too hard. Leveling up has its disadvantages as well.

Oh? This was the first time Dallion had heard of that.

Levels breed arrogance. Arrogance leads to stupid mistakes Vend sighed. Anyway, youre doing well enough.

Okay Dallion wasnt convinced. Shouldnt I pass some other test to increase my rank or something?

You want to become an elite?

Well yeah, Dallion smirked. For the moment I was thinking of something more realistic. Think Im good for a senior member test?

Youre talking like the big five Ranks here arent as important.

They let you pick better jobs, which means more money.

Youve already been invited to the greatest job the guild has. What more do you want? Or is it about getting a shiny new emblem?

Dallion didnt reply; he was too ashamed to admit that he really wanted to have a shiny new emblem to illustrate his progress and also get him to join the cool crowd. Despite Nils insistence to the contrary, emblems played an important part of life in the city. It wasnt just the money received, it was the treatment people got. While Vend and the other elites of the Icepicker guild didnt display their emblems, other awakened from higher rank did, and always got discounts as a result.

Estezol could tell you more on that, but if you ask me in your case, its a waste of time, unless you seriously want to become a lieutenant.

The thought definitely had merit. For a moment Dallion imagined himself walking about the guild, recruiting people based on their skills and maximizing their efficiency during jobs. It also meant he could show off. Although, at that point, hed probably have to quit his job at the Gremlins Timepiece. Having a lieutenant work as an inn awakened was a bit inappropriate.

If you want fame and trinkets, itll be easier to take part in the festival tournament.

Dallions eyes sparked. He had heard a lot mentioned about the tournaments. The main problem was that in order to participate, he needed the guild masters approval. The general idea was that guilds selected representatives to compete in a variety of real-world fields: combat, crafting, and performance. Dallion wanted to try out in all of them, but Nil had made it clear that he was unlikely to get selected. Pretty much the tournament was a captains arena and exceptions were rare.

Youll ask March to recommend me? Dallion could hear his own enthusiasm ring from inside him as a bell.

The individual tournament, Vend explained.

Huh? This wasnt something Dallion had heard.

Its not as glamorous as the real thing, but you still get to receive a trinket and maybe a little more if the crowd likes you.

I've never heard of that

Because no one considers it a big deal. You go through several rounds before the festival even starts. Direct combat. Your goal is to win and nothing more. If you stack up enough wins, you get to the selection phase. Vend smirked as he said that. There you get the honor to compete with the other winners for the honor of becoming an opponent for the real elimination rounds.

Dallion thought a bit about this, then thought a bit more.

I don't get it, he admitted at last.

With the number of guilds growing, it has become necessary that all guild representatives pass through a preliminary round to trim down the numbers to a more acceptable level. With crafting, the process is easy: the noble in charge glances at the items made and chooses the best. Performance is made into a sort of warm-up that goes on for about a week before the countess arrives. The crowd determines who goes on there. That leaves combat, which is done discreetly behind the scenes.

Oh. That didn't sound glamorous at all.

All the individual event winners will form groups of three and fight against a representative. If you manage to defeat three representatives, you are allowed to join as a wildcard.

That sounded quite interesting.

You'll certainly lose in the first round, but at least you'll do so in front of an audience. Oh, and you get a shiny emblem for making it that far.

Nice. Dallion couldn't remove the grin from his face. What about the others in my group? Do they join as well?

Anyone who gets three wins. Don't worry, though. Most can't make it past one.

## Chapter 230: Application

As Dallion's father back on Earth used to say, bureaucracy was nothing more than a side effect of size. Getting to apply for the individual tournament showed him that Nerosal was no exception. In many aspects the power of the awakened and the areas they controlled got around a lot of the obvious signs of needless bureaucracy. However, when more day-to-day things got involved, the silent monster reared its ugly head.

Estezol had been a considerable help in writing down the required application form, including getting the guild's seal of approval and finding captain Adzorg to act as a sponsor. After that Dallion had gone through a fort of the city guards supposedly to check that he hadn't broken the way in any way then through the city's treasury representative. As it turned out, taxes were very real and complicated, just not for the awakened. That was also one of the reasons why if the city asked a guild to do something like go ahead with the bet about the Stone Garden they did without argument.

At the treasury building which was a rather small though well-kept building, Dallion a quick check was made to ensure that Dallion wasn't in debt. The fact that they could do such a check at all made Dallion feel a bit uneasy. It was only after that Nil explained that the check only extended to dealings with nobles and merchant organizations. Once he was given the go-ahead and the seal to prove it Dallion was finally able to go to the festival committee itself, where he had to wait in a

rather large room full to the brim with people. Clearly, he wasn't the only person who wanted to give it a try. If anything, he was rather late with it.

Hey, I know you! a female voice said behind Dallion. You're the blonde's bard.

The description, although apt, wasn't particularly flattering. Putting on his best smile, he turned around to politely explain that he wasn't a bard, let alone of the Luors, when he saw a familiar face looking back.

Bel? Dallion blinked. The face was definitely hers, though the voice hadn't been.

Got you, the girl laughed, using her own voice.

You sure did. How, though?

Family trick. Helps when I need to get out of trouble. I don't normally resort to it, but seeing your expression was worth it.

*I bet it was.*

So, thinking of trying out at the event as well? Bel glanced at the crowd. It wasn't difficult to notice that her clothes were much brighter than she usually wore. Also, Dallion could swear that she had a few more piercings on her ears since the last time they had spoken.

Yep. Going for the long shot. You too, I guess?

I'm just here for the hands-on experience. It's one of the few places there are, so why not take advantage? Spike suggested it. Well, he also suggested that I could join him in his bar fights.

I see.

Having Bel take part in a barroom blitz didn't seem right.

Anyone else from the guild applying?

A few, though not too many. Veil was bummed out that he couldn't join. A pity. Would have liked to watch him fight.

He isn't applying?

He can't. Only double digits, and he still doesn't want to get his trial over with.

Right.

Dallion seemed to vaguely remember Bel telling him she had become a double digit not too long ago. Most of the pack rats had done so as well, with Falkner being the notable exception.

Keeping a calm exterior, Dallion glanced about, scouting the competition. From what he could see, quite a few of them had guild emblems. After spending so much time in the city, he had started recognizing some of them. For the most part, the applicants belonged to lesser guilds. A few appeared to have no guild affiliation, with fewer still belonging to the big five. If Dallion was to guess, most of the people were in the lower teen levels, with a few notable exceptions.

Not many from the big guilds, Dallion noted.

That's because they get a quick pass, Bel whispered with a grumble. The only ones left are trouble makers and complete newbies.

*Know anything on the matter, Nil?*

*Since when?*

*Since long before you got here.*

The queue moved rather quickly. Each interview was a simple handshake, after which the applicant either went through the doorway leading further into the building, or left with a deep feeling of regret and disappointment.

By the time Dallions turn came, he had already run a few possible scenarios in his head. After the handshake, the familiar green rectangle appeared.

### **ITEM AWAKENING**

Dallion found himself in a rather large room full of exquisitely expensive furniture. The committee bureaucrat thin lady who had the appearance of the strictest librarian Dallion had seen was sitting on a large, comfortable couch made of plush and leather.

An Icepicker, the woman noted with apparent disappointment. At least you know some music. She looked at a scroll on the marble desk in front of her. At this point Dallion thought it might not be the best idea to try and influence her using those particular skills. Been her only a few months?

In real time only, Dallion explained. Its been over

Im only interested in real time, the woman cut him short. Youre familiar with the rules of the tournament?

Yes, it was

After were done here, youre to go through five preliminary rounds. With three of those, you move to the next phase of the selection process. Provided you make it that far, youll go through a few rounds against other applicants. If youre left standing after that, a final decision will be made to determine whether you continue or not. Questions?

There was no safe way to respond to that. The woman tended to be prone to interrupting people and, by the looks of it, quite short-tempered. Having to do the same with every applicant must have drained every last drop of joy from her, transforming her into a cynical husk. Dallion shivered at the notion of what life must be like for an awakened bureaucrat. She must have spent centuries dealing with it.

Does that mean Ive passed the initial phase?

its difficult to not to. The bureaucrat let out an annoyed sigh. Only the hopeless cases are turned down, or those caught cheating.

Who

Only double digit awakened are allowed to apply, unless there is a severe shortage of candidates, she continued without even waiting for the rest of the question. Given the level of the guild appointees, only a double digit will stand a chance. Anything else?

Dallion shook his head.

Good. Through the door and to the left. Follow the red signs.

Before Dallion could attempt to thank her, he was back in the large waiting room. Knowing it wasn't wise to infuriate an annoyed bureaucrat, he quickly followed the instructions, with as little as a thank you.

The crowd was far smaller in the next room. There were a total of twenty desks, each with a person at them. One look was enough to determine that each of the people were also awakened, and in no better mood than the woman Dallion had just gone through.

You, a bureaucrat at a free desk said at Dallion. Come here.

I was told to follow the red signs, Dallion tried to explain.

Oh, that doesn't matter. Just get here.

*Go ahead. Despite their appearance, they need good fodder for the real preliminary round.*

Can someone throw me a few reds? the bureaucrat shouted as Dallion started his way towards him.

Almost immediately, a series of plates and candlesticks flew through the room. The speed and precision with which the bureaucrat managed to catch them all, still keeping his bored expression, clearly showed that the bureaucrats in this room definitely had skills.

Icepicker? the man asked, looking at Dallion's emblem.

Yes, Dallion replied, hesitating whether to add sir to the end.

Any sanitation experience?

Not particularly. I'm mostly an item explorer. The man gave Dallion the clear oh, you're one of those look. But I did help improve the Stone Garden, Dallion added quickly.

Hmm. The man's attitude quickly changed. Dallion could feel the slightest vibration of thanks coming from the bureaucrat. Naturally, none of this gratitude was voiced.

Anyway, here are your items. Mend and improve them. I suggest you start with the simpler ones and move to the next.

That's the test? Dallion was taken aback. When the woman had told him he'd go through five rounds, he didn't think that meant five rounds of fighting guardians.

Just the first stage. We need to determine if you're any good.

The cynic in Dallion also suspected that they were using this for some free labor, getting a large set of items improved. There was no way to know for certain, of course, but given that these were house items and not random stones and pebbles, the notion was looking more likely.

Only one level? Dallion asked to make sure. After that I move to the next?



Thats about it.

The task didnt seem difficult in the least, so Dallion went on with it. The repair part was just as annoying as he remembered. No fighting creatures, he had to go through a maze and rearrange sections and reassemble broken pieces, until everything was in order. It took Dallion about three hours to fix the first itema porcelain plate, before he got to face its guardian. In this case, the guardian was a flying manta raybeautiful to look at, and not too difficult to defeat. All in all, it had taken Dallion some acrobatics and a few shots from his dartbow to do the trick. Thinking back, this was how Gloria had fought against the training guardian during the chainling hunt.

Once the plate was finished, Dallion moved onto the first candlestick. The maze was pretty much of the same difficulty, although the guardian was slightly more difficulta metal colossus that was about eight feet tall. Dallion had tried offering a draw, but ultimately, hed ended up having to fight the guardian as well.

The next item seemed to have a bit of rust on it, so Dallion left it for last, focusing on the remaining two instead. Their guardians were just as easy as the first candlestick, although just as reluctant to surrender or accept a draw as the previous ones. It took Dallion about an hour to complete each, after which he went back to the rusty one.

Dallion mentally nodded. He wasnt certain how rust would be presented in an item, but he was ready all the same. As it turned out, it was very different from what he expected. There were no creatures or insects in the items realm when he entered. Instead, whole sections of maze walls were discolored and crumbling to touch.

Brushing his hand over the spot was the same as swiping off dust from a glass table: there was a lot of coughing and sneezing involved, and a solid surface was eventually revealed beneath it all. There was just one catch: removing the dust didnt do anything to fix the item, nor could Dallion use other parts of the maze to fill them in. At this point, he decided to get creative.

The item appeared in his hand. Like everything else in the awakened realm, the item was of perfect purity, which allowed Dallion to fill in the holes the same way he used to fill holes with chewing gum back when he was a child. It wasnt particularly pretty, and Nil had a lot of harsh things to say in the matter, but as far as the rectangles were concerned, it did the job. Still, Dallion was quite happy that there wasnt anyone to follow his progress.

The guardian, as before, proved no particular challenge, quickly allowing Dallion to focus on his athletic skills and earn himself another easy skill increase. When it was all over, his acrobatics were at twenty-seven, while his guard skills were thirty-one.

There you go, Dallion said upon returning to the real world. Is that all? All the fighting and mending had made him quite hungry, yet there was no free food here. All he could do was keep his hunger in check until all this was over.

Hmm, the bureaucrat took the items and closely examined them. Not the best work, he said, although Dallion could instantly tell that he was lying. Still, good enough for you to go to the next round. He took a small sigil ring and handed it to Dallion. Youll be informed where and when to go

for the next phase of the trial. Do not lose or damage the ring in any way. Its your proof for the next trial. If you dont have it, youll be awarded an instant loss. Any questions?

No, Dallon put the ring on his pinky finger. There are no questions. Im just looking forward to the next phase.