

Leveling up 41

Chapter 41: Thread of Smoke

There was no way of telling whether Veil succeeded or not. In the course of the day he approached the Cleric, then walked back to the volunteer group without a word. Dallion suspected that a longer conversation had taken place, possibly accompanied with a trial as well, all in the awakened state. The results remained unknown, but based on Veils expression they cant have been too good.

To make matters worse, by order of the Dame, Gloria along with all other level fours, was moved further to the front of the group. When Dallion tried to ask about the reason for this change, he was only told to shut up and keep walkingnot the most trust inspiring reaction one could get.

Dont worry, Havoc approached. Shes in better hands than the lot of us.

What do you mean?

Shes a four. Parties tend to protect those. At least more than us losers, the large man laughed. Shouldnt complain too much, though. Could have been worse. We could have been twos.

That didnt sound too encouraging either.

What happens to twos? Dallion asked.

Nothing much. The soldiers wont go out of their way to save them if things get bad. Then again, you cant be sure about anything during hunts. What happens happens, so why waste time worrying about it, right? He gave Dallion a pat on the back, almost knocking him to the ground.

A few steps away Veil snorted, though didnt voice any comments.

You know a lot about hunts, Dallion grumbled.

You live a long life, you pick up a thing or two. Also, this isnt my first party.

Oh? This sparked Dallions interest, and not only his. Veil along with another few people within earshot casually moved closer, trying to listen in on the conversation.

Its no big deal. Havoc shrugged. Every few years some bad beastie starts causing problems and one troop or other has to go and kill it. Its inevitable to happen, even in the middle of nowhere. I guess youre just been lucky so far.

Does that mean

On guard! Dame Vesuvia shouted.

The hunting party reacted immediately. Like a well-oiled machine the soldiers spread out, forming a circle. Kalis along with one other went to the volunteers and started giving out bolts and strings.

Youve got five shots, he said, handing the bolt pack to Dallion. Make them count.

Whats going on? Dallion whispered.

Kalis looked him in the eyes for several seconds, then gave a pack to Veil.

Dont get yourselves killed.

Dallion felt shivers down his spine.

The bolt pack was made to fit the dartbow perfectly. Dallion watched the people around him click it in place with one swift action, then place the string to the sides of the weapons limb. Silently, he did the same.

Five shots not nearly as many as hed used in training. Both he and Veil had been generous at the number of shots, often using the weapon as a repeater gun. Only Gloria had tried to be more conservative, just shooting when she absolutely had to. Even so, Dallion doubted shed be able to manage with such an amount.

Dont waste your bolts, Kalis shouted for all to hear. Shoot only if your life is in danger! Dont charge out or try to help us!

More clicks followed, as the group prepped their weapons, followed by silence. Dallion stood up, trying to see over the circle of soldiers. With the exception of a few hills nearby and a chain of snow-covered mountains in the distance, there was nothing remarkable in the area just cold grassy plains continuing on and on.

Smoke. It took him a while to notice it. Little more than a black thread, it rose into the sky, originating from relatively close by. Dallion rose on his toes to try and see more, but Havoc grabbed him by the shoulder, slamming him back down.

Dont, the red haired whispered. Youll see it soon enough.

The entire group fell silent to the point that steps, even the occasional movement of chainmail could be heard.

How close is it? Vesuvia asked, drawing a two-piece sword. Back on Earth the weapon would be pegged as a cheap movie prop and completely ignored. Here, though, Dallion could feel its power even from this distance; the two blade part shaped like a tuning fork were never meant to be the cutting part, they merely held the real blade, created from what could only be described as hardened air.

Half a day, the cleric said, removing his hood. Fifteen hours at most. It did its thing and moved on.

By the Crippleds luck! Thats the last thing I needed! The Dame scowled. Did it heal?

Maybe. Ill need to check the spot to know more. Either way, if we dont hurry itll get stronger.

Youre sure its not hiding?

There was a long pause. Dallion, like many others, held his breath. He didnt know the specifics of the conversation, but his imagination did a pretty good job of filling in the blanks.

Its nowhere near, the Cleric replied after a while. Ill go and check.

No. We all go. Ill need you close in case we lose the trail again.

We cant waste time, Initiate. Ill go see. You need to continue on its trail. If it finds more health bags, you might not be able to take it down.

Yes, Initiate. The Cleric bowed only. By the Seven Moons.

By the Seven. The Dame sheathed her sword. Double march forward! she ordered. Heavy troops in front, volunteers in the back! Keep your eyes peeled and dont stop until ordered!

Chapter 42: The Caravan

The source of the fire turned out to be the remains of several wooden wagons. As the hunting party approached, Dallion was able to see more details of the scene, and just as Havoc had predicted, he wished that he hadnt. People and beasts of burden were scattered on the ground charred or ripped to pieces, sometimes both. The remains of two large wagons lay smoldering, most of their wheels bashed off. Whatever beast had done this, it had to be fast, strong, and extremely bloodthirsty just like the practice Guardian Dallion had faced so many times in the last few days.

Any survivors? Dallion whispered turning to Havoc.

The large man shook his head.

Not too far away, Gloria vomited on the ground. The smell of living remains, tolerable for Dallion and the rest, proved too strong for her.

Its not here, the Cleric said in a partially told-you-so, voice.

I want lookouts! Dame Vesuvia shouted. Three pairs. If you spot anything, come back here! The rest of you search the remains. I want to know exactly what happened here. Volunteers, help in!

Six soldiers rushed off in three directions as ordered. The rest relaxed their guard and dispersed throughout the area. With less people in one spot, the degree of devastation was far more visible. Whatever the group had been, it was definitely large, by all accounts larger than the hunting party. Over a dozen bodies were in the vicinity alone and several more were visible a short distance away.

You two, Kalis pointed to Dallion and Veil. Come here!

Dallions stomach churned, but he obeyed. Veil didnt seem to have such an issue, for not only did he go to the soldier without hesitation, but bent down over what was left of a half-burned corpse.

Soldiers? Veil asked, taking the hold of a sword from the dead mans grip.

Mercenaries more like, Kalis replied, then bent down and removed the black rag that had once probably been a shirt of some sort. A glittering locket appeared hanging round the bodys neck. Surprisingly, other than a bit of blood, it didnt seem damaged in any way. Merchant emblem! he shouted. Foreign.

Fighting the discomfort in his stomach, Dallion moved closer to get a better look. The emblem seemed similar to the one hed been given, but was also different. Instead of six gems, it was composed of three metal rings one within another. The outmost one was made of bluish silver metal, the middle one appeared to be gold, and the innermost seemed like red copper.

Where do you think they were going? the Dame asked. There arent any trading cities this far west.

They dont need a city to trade, Initiate, the Cleric said, making Dallion look over his shoulder. Especially if it saves them some coin.

Black market trading? Vesuvia didnt seem convinced.

As you yourself said, theres nothing this far west. The chance of anyone stumbling on them by accident is next to none. A perfect place to exchange illicit goods, or something more blasphemous.

Slaughtered by a chainling during a secret meeting. It would have been poetic if it wasnt so serious.

The Seven only protect those who accept protection.

Hey, give me a hand, Veil said, bringing Dallions attention back onto the corpse. Grab his boots and help me turn over.

Whats that for?

I want to check something without having him break up in my hands.

Imagining the colorful event made Dallions stomach twitch. Even so, he had no intention of backing out. If he were to face the chainling hed see far worse.

As the duo put the body on its stomach, a new series of wounds emergedtwo dozen dagger incisions tearing through the dead mans clothes, each as if made by a dagger.

I knew it, Veil smiled. You can let go.

What is it? Dallion asked.

He wasnt bitten and then burned. He was burned because he was bitten. Its just like the thing weve been training against.

I dont remember any of that.

Thats because you never got seriously bitten. When the creature bites deep its like fountains of flames passing through you. I thought it was part of the training, but it looks like its the real thing as well.

A chainling does that?

Things became much more complicated. Dallion looked around. Kalis had gone off to show the merchant emblem to Dame Vesuvia and the cleric. Everyone else seemed to be a short distance away.

If the chainling does that, being in the back rows wont be very safe either.

I guess. Veil didnt seem worried in the least. Its not like theres much we can do. Ill go see if theres anything left in the wagons. Will you lend a hand?

Dallion didnt finish that thought. Rather, a new one had popped in his head.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion took his dartbow out of its holster. A moment later, the scene of carnage vanished.

Personal awakening!

Chapter 43: Limiting Echo

Dallion took a deep breath. Entering the library in his awakened realm became more difficult each time. When his grandfather had told him about it, hed been curious; the second time-hed been cautious. Now, after the scribe echo had tried to kill him with feathers, he was outright terrified.

Clutching his emblem with his left hand, Dallion forced himself to cross the threshold. The instant he did, he felt the weight of two mountains on his shoulders.

So, you decided to come back. The scribe said, arms crossed, leaning against the edge of the desk. Didnt have enough last time? He raised a finger in the air.

Dallion knew perfectly well what would follow. Dozens of voices filled his mind with yells to get out.

Still here? The scribe sounded somewhat confused.

Y-yes! Dallion managed to mutter. I-I-I think theres something y-you should know.

Is that so? The echo took a step closer. Tell me, before I kick you out and

Dallion didnt let the scribe finish. Drenched in sweat, he raised his dartbow and took one shot right at the echos chest. There was a single poof after which the scribe had vanished, along with the crushing atmosphere of the room.

Now that it was over, it was so anticlimactic that it felt disappointing. Moments ago, Dallion had imagined an entirely different scenario involving quills darting at him from all sides, and him rushing about in an effort to evade them. The initial shot had only been aimed to provoke the echo, not destroy it. Not that Dallion was complaining. Getting rid of the echos burden made him feel like

on the first day of spring break. That was not all. As fear left Dallions mind, it was replaced by dozens of questions and a thirst for answers.

Youre never to leave the village. Going to the cities is bad. Youll never survive there. Stay in the village where its safe.

Thats whats been keeping me in the village? Dallion crumbled the sheet of paper. Morbid curiosity tempted him to read through all of the scribes notes just to see how much damage the echo had done. Common sense made him focus on more important things or at least leave the fun reading for later.

Apparently, the world was of a late medieval type, following an evolved feudal model. The Tamin Empire of which Dallions village was part of was said to span half the world, although Dallion had serious doubts for that to be true. The hamlet of Dherma, along with another handful of villages, was located in the southwest reaches of the Empire next to a whole lot of nothing. The province of Wetiemore a fiefdom by Earth standard had been established by the Imperial Knight Sir Kaan several generations ago during the Empires last wave of expansion. After his death, most of the local nobles had moved to larger, more prosperous regions, leaving their hereditary domain in neglect. Lacking an owner, the land eventually entered the domain of Countess Priscord, who had no interest in it whatsoever and let the villages fend for themselves. Ever since, the local villages had been self-governed.

That explained a few things. For one, Dallion now knew why the village chief was so obsessed with echoing everyone and keeping them from leaving the village. If the people learned what was out there, a lot of the younger generation would have left to seek their luck and fortune elsewhere, or worked to build up the village so it would attract more merchants. Either option threatened the Luor monopoly of power.

Dallion looked at the library of books. There were quite a few of them knowledge of the world, knowledge how to live, even some interesting myths and folktales he had heard as a child. All that knowledge was now his, along with the questions it brought.

Dal! Veil shouted from the remains of a wagon a short distance away. Look what I found!

As he walked, one thing caught his attention. The soldiers didnt seem to be interested in the weapons or valuables scattered about, but they were very eager to collect the merchant emblems. Kalis, along with another soldier, were keeping count making sure that the number of emblems matched the corpses.

Look what I got. Veil pulled out a sword from the ground, from the wreckage. It was massive, at least four feet long, with a two-hand hilt. The ease with which the blond held it with one hand, made the weapon look like a movie prop, but Dallion knew he couldnt lift it on his own. Awakened steel, Veil tapped on the side of the blade. I think Ill keep this.

Sure, if they let you have it. Dallion shrugged. He was a tiny bit envious, but after experiencing the awesome power of ranged combat, he wasnt losing any sleep over a sword, especially one he couldnt lift at his present level.

Battlefield lawfinders keepers. Veil swung the sword about, doing a perfect butterfly swing. Besides, its not like theyll give me any of their weapons.

Guess not. Dallion nodded. Anything else good in there?

Nothing much. Check if you want.

Ill do that. You better go have a word with Kalis about your sword. If you tell him about it on your own, youll have a better chance of keeping it.

Right. Veils smile vanished. Thats actually smart.

Yeah, yeah. Dallion laughed. At the same time, he also felt pity. If Veil had an echo, a lot of things would probably seem smart.

Dal, you okay?

Dallion looked over his shoulder. Yeah. Why?

I dont know. You seem different somehow You were all shivering a moment ago and now youre more like you were after your awakening.

Well, I guess I am. Dallion smiled. I just decided to stop being afraid.

Chapter 44: Merchant Tombstone

The bodies were buried without much fanfare. Once they were gathered in one spot, the Cleric did something making the ground open up and swallowed them up. Seconds later a clay tombstone emerged, marking the place and giving a very brief description etched on the surface.

Merchant Caravan

Killed by chainling

Year of the Seven, 1205

Shortly later, the hunting party was on the march again. The groups formation changed again. Dame Vesuvia, along with the strongest soldiers of the group, were in front leading the way, while the Cleric had joined the volunteers in the back. At first Dallion thought the albino was sent here to be safe, but after a while he realized the obviousthe Cleric was protecting them.

With the limiter echo gone, Dallion could remember the details of the Order, such as he had heard them. It was said that when the Seven Moons granted the gift of awakening to the inhabitants of the world, the Order was established to guide the chosen and protect the world from chaos and destruction. Since then, it had spread throughout the known world, helping people, advising rulers, taking care of those that no one else would. Their monasteries were open to all, granting them sanctuary from pursuit, food, and if they wished knowledge and the ability to join their ranks.

Everyone should have been happy that someone of that stature had joined the hunting party, yet what Dallion could see above all else was a reluctant fear of his presence. If anything, Veil was the only one who had dared get close to him. Even Havoc kept a safe distance.

Just look at him, Gloria hissed under her breath. Just because he found a sword doesn't mean he's anything special. He should have given that thing away, not argued to keep it.

He didn't exactly argue.

More likely it was a stubborn pleading that had earned him the right to carry the weapon until things calmed down.

Can he use it?

Oh, I'm sure he's already tried. Even back home he'd be the one trying out all sorts of weapons in his awakened state. Mother was proud, but father despised him for it.

How are you? Dallion asked. Soldiering on?

I'm fine. Gloria raised her chin. I'm a level four. I have a better chance of surviving than all of you.

That wasn't what Dallion asked, but he nodded nonetheless. Even with his meager perception, he could see her tenseness.

What do you think of the chainling? he changed the subject. Definitely tougher than the thing we fought in practice.

Gloria went silent. For half a minute she didn't say a word, walking on, eyes on the ground.

There's no beating it. The Dame could probably survive the fight, maybe the Cleric, but none of the rest of us will, each word was uttered in a whisper so faint that only Dallion could hear it. The rest of us are walking to our own slaughter.

Gloria

There's no hope. The only reason I'm sticking to the group is because it'll be even worse if I run off. The soldiers know it, even the other rejects know it.

Gloria, we're not rejects

And how could it be any different? We're village bound, we were never supposed to leave the village. Nothing protects us here. Nothing

It was obvious that Gloria still had an echo, and its grip over her was getting stronger. The emblem Dallion had received had initially reduced the echos influence, but fear had somehow reactivated it. Now, there was only one thing Dallion could do to help Gloria get stronger.

Personal Awakening

This was the first time Dallion had invited anyone in his awakening room. It was far easier than he had expected, though strange nonetheless. Thankfully, the blue rectangle displaying his level was nowhere around.

Gloria blinked several times, then froze, then finally shook her head, as if rinsing the fear off her hair.

Youve got an echo, dont you? Dallion asked.

The blonde girl nodded.

Everyone has. Usually, I can negotiate with it about things, but the last few days

Yeah. Dallion put his hand on her shoulder. Ever since the chainling got close. You dont have to put up with it. With the dartbow you can just shoot it and

I know youre trying to be a friend, but youre ignorant.

For some reason the words stung.

An echo guides and protects. If I destroy it, Ill be left on my own. You cant always rush at things head on. Sometimes you need to pause and think a little.

It worked out so far.

The worst part was that Dallion had no way of knowing whether Gloria was right, or was the echo weaving a web of lies to protect itself.

Also, you wont be alone. Im here. If anything happens, Ill take care of it. Just like we did in the awakening shrine.

This is more serious than an awakening trial. Glorias voice softened a bit. here we can actually die.

Only if we let it happen. Weve been doing pretty well in training lately. And that was just three of us. There will be a lot more.

The caravan had a lot more. Look what happened to them.

Not all of them were awakened, Dallion lied. There was no way to know for sure. So far only part of the weapons had been special, but that was far from a guarantee. You dont need an echo to help you. Once you get rid of it the world will be a whole different place. Trust me on this.

Gloria didnt say a word. The struggle was written all over her face. She wanted to believe him, but also didnt dare to.

No. Gloria pushed the weapon back in his hand. I need to do this alone, or not at all. If Im to be the groups scout, I cant rely on others.

The pair went out of Dallions awakened state.

Chapter 45: Ambushed

Gloria didnt say a word after returning to the real world. Her panic had subsided, but there was no telling whether the talk with Dallion had calmed her down, or she was simply good at hiding things. Not too long after, the group slowed pace. Gloria was called by the Dame and sent off with another soldier to scout on ahead. Everyone else was ordered to stop and resta real rest, not the awakened replacement they had done so far.

The volunteers, feeling that they might not get many chances after this, took the opportunity to relax a bit. The soldiers, on the other hand, were tenser than ever, keeping their eyes peeled. Interestingly enough, Havoc was also quieter than Dallion remembered him.

What happened? Veil approached.

Huh?

I saw you with my sister. What did you chat about?

What did you talk about in your awakened state? The blond interrupted. Did you think I wouldnt notice? Weve been training like this for days. Of course Ill know when you pull something off like that.

That was untypically smart of Veil, so much so that it had caught Dallion completely off guard. It wasnt that he had anything to hidewell, there were a few things, but not related to Gloriabut rather that he didnt expect Veil of all people to notice it happening.

So much for being discreet.

Well? Veil pressed on.

We were talking about echoes. Judging by Veils reaction, Dallion was right on the money. The one your grandfather put in the entire village. Funny how there was no malice in his words as he said that. I got rid of mine and told her to do the same. She didnt seem ready.

Idiot. Veil snarled, making it impossible to determine whether he was referring to his sister or Dallion.

How did you get rid of yours?

The echos no problem. He tried bossing me around, but I beat him up. That was years ago. Now he helps me when I need to figure things out.

An unexpected approach, without a doubt. Dallion could almost imagine the scene. Apparently if someone was all brawn and adrenalin, playing mind tricks wouldnt take on. If anything, this could well be the single case in the entire village, in which the echo was more miserable than its host.

Anything else?

I did.

Dallions smirk vanished. What? When? You didnt say anything when you went to the Cleric, so I thought

I got it done on the first go. Part of Veils natural smugness shone through. It wasnt even difficult.

That wasnt because of the trial, Veils expression suddenly went dark. It was what the Cleric told me. He looked over his shoulder. He said that even with that level we wont be able to escape our prison.

Our prison? An interesting choice of words. Could it be he was talking about the village? Or was there something else in play? What did he mean by that?

No idea. All he said was

Look out! Havoc yelled, then grabbed Dallion and Veil by their shirts and pulled them back just in time to avoid a flaming wagon wheel that came crashing down from the sky. A wave of fire burst, throwing everyone nearby to the ground.

Chainling! someone yelled.

Dallion felt the heatwave, along with the weight of Havoc on top of him. The large mans armor was scorched, letting off the familiar smell of burned leather. Battle instincts kicked in. All the hours spent fighting the echo made Dallion react. Before he knew it, he was back on his feet, dartbow in hand. It was only at this point that he noticed something was missingthere was no buckler on Dallions left hand.

You okay? Veil stood up, offering a hand to Havoc.

Watch the sky. There might be more. Havoc let out a groan. Bloody leg! Thats what happens when you get bumped down to a three.

Chaos was erupting. Soldiers were running forward, forming a defensive line. Half the volunteers were in shock, the other half looking wildly about for other flaming projectiles in the sky.

This was the point at which a rectangle would appear, warning Dallion of imminent danger, along with a whole range of markers. Only now did he realize how much he missed them. Fighting in an awakened state was easythere were so many tools to aid him. Here, he had to rely on his gut and senses. Thankfully, those were improved.

Can you fight?Dallion glanced over his shoulder to Veil.

Im fine. Veil replied, holding a sword in one hand and a dartbow in the other. Wheres Gloria?

Up ahead. Lets go get her.

Are you crazy? Havoc shouted. Theres a chainling out there. You wont last a minute against it.

Is it safer here?

As if on cue, another flaming wagon piece landed, this one half a dozen steps away.

Besides, we dont need to fight it. We just need to find Gloria. Next to Dallion, Veil nodded. Lets go.

Wait! Havoc tried to get up on his feet, but the pain in his broken leg made him crash back down. Damn it! He yelled, fighting the pain. Listen, the weak spot is in the chest, right under the throat. Got that? Under the throat!

Got it. Dallion caught a glimpse of an abandoned dartbow nearby. Whoever its owner was, they were either dead or in no condition to use it.

Grabbing it quickly with his left hand, he then rushed forward. In the distance, more flaming balls of fire appeared in the sky, but that wasnt an issue. Dallions only concern was Gloria. The rest could wait.

Chapter 46: Rushing up

It didnt take long for Dallion to dash past the protective line of soldiers. All the awakened training he had done had improved his body and behavior to the point he could almost see the guide-markers without them being there. His body strafed and swirled almost on its own, passing by people and obstacles alike. Of course, it was a plus that no one actively tried to stop himthe skilled soldiers had the goal of keeping the chainling from reaching the heart of the group, they werent concerned with people getting out.

To the left, Dallion shouted as he turned. Behind him, Veil followed.

While not as nimble as Dallion, the blonds physical development allowed him to keep up with ease. If anything in more cases than not Dallion was slowing him down.

You sure this is a good idea? Veil asked as a burning yak splattered on the ground no more than fifty feet away.

Game theory. Dallion grinned running on. In truth, it was more a case of gaming theory but the logic held true. The hunting party and the chainling must be evenly matched. So just as were afraid of it, its afraid of us. The entire reason its bombarding us with chunks of burning wagons is to cause enough chaos so it could then run in for the kill. The soldiers know that so theyre standing their ground.

Bombarding? Veil asked, confused.

Throwing. Dallion made a mental note to stick to local terms when talking.

An entire wagon roof appeared in the sky, flying directly towards Dame Vesuvia. The woman didnt budge. Remaining on her horse, like a statue, she drew her sword and waited. When the mass of flaming wood came near, she performed a single strike, slicing the threat out of existence.

Theres no way I can do that, Veil said. He too was impressed, though clearly had a much higher opinion of himself. What if the chainling throws that at us?

It wont. It wont even notice us. If anything, that only ensured itll pay even more attention to the Dame from now on.

Chainlings are monsters. There's no way they're that smart.

Oh, it's smart. Dallion knew just as much about chainlings as Veil, which was to say only what he'd been told since joining the hunting party. Even so, the way the beast behaved made him come to certain conclusions. It saved a few of the caravan wagons to use against us. Also, it let us track it down so it could ambush us.

How are you even getting all that?

Think about it. It's been hunted for a week at least, and suddenly now it starts leaving tracks? The Cleric said that it had regained strength by killing the caravan, so how come it's easier to track now?

It's overconfident?

Only something smart can be overconfident. Dallion grinned to himself. And if it was, wouldn't it take us head on, instead of making it seem it's running? It's been waiting for us. I'd say that Gloria forced it to tip its hand. Seeing her, it knew the rest of the group was nearby, so it started throwing things at us sooner than it thought. That's why now's our chance to go find her and get her safely away before the beast and Dame Vesuvia start getting serious.

All that was speculation on Dallion's part, but he felt it to be true. The last time he'd been so convinced was when facing a MMO dungeon boss with a guild. The guild master hadn't listened to him, despite being his best friend, resulting in a total wipe of the party. A few weeks later, Dallion had come across a YouTube video using his exact strategy.

Still he'd come to the conclusion almost too easily. Getting rid of the echo was one thing Dallion had felt like he'd broken free from a full body plaster cast but the way the ideas had popped in his head at a moment's notice was next to surreal.

Just trust me, okay?

Dallion expected some sort of verbal confrontation from Veil, or at the very least an attempt at sarcasm. Instead, all he got was an approving grunt; Veil had accepted him as a leader.

Based on the trajectory of flying objects, Dallion had a pretty good idea where the chainling was located. The precision in which it managed to target the Dame specifically suggested that it had a unimpeded line of sight, or some other way to scope the area. In turn, that suggested that Gloria couldn't have gone too far ahead.

We need a good vantage point, Dallion said, heading up the nearest hill. Since the caravan, Dame Vesuvius had opted to focus on speed rather than anything else, choosing the flat space between hills to catch up faster. The chainling had taken advantage of that to prepare its ambush. What about Gloria, though?

Dallion felt a lump in his throat. Relying on her perception, the girl had probably come to a similar conclusion and gone in search of a high vantage point. If so, why wasn't he seeing her yet?

The further up Dallion got, the more his concern grew. The game logic he had spouted a moment ago seemed all but hollow now. What if the chainling hadn't attacked the main group directly, but

eliminated the scout first? Or even worse, what if the Dame had no intention of using Gloria as a scout, but as a lure?

A few hundred feet away, Dallions heart sank. Upon nearing the top of the hill, a patch of charred grass became visible. The chainling had targeted this first

Why are you here? a dry voice asked.

Chapter 47: Preparation

The Cleric emerged out of nothing. One moment he wasnt there, the next the lines of his silhouette appeared, gradually getting filled like a paint by numbers picture. Without question it was very impressive, not to mention very magic related.

From what Dallion had been told, the magic stat was one of those believed to have been lost to humanity. Those born with it should have been treated as national treasures. To be in the presence of such a person, one couldnt help to feel in awe. In Dallions case awe was mixed with relief, for beside the Cleric, Gloria had appeared as well and by the looks of it she wasnt remotely hurt.

I asked you a question. The Cleric didnt seem amused.

We came to see what had happened with the scouting party. Dallion kept his cool. And to weaken the chainling so Dame Vesuvia could kill it.

The last created enough interest for the Cleric to remove his hood. Cold red eyes stared into Dallions making him feel like an ant under a magnifying glass on a hot summer day.

You arent lying, the albino cleric noted. Youre also stupid.

Whats your plan?

Dallion blinked. That was kind of sudden. In his mind he had imagined a long and complicated oral argument, with dozens of points and counterpoints. Then again, arguing on a battlefield close to a chainling wasnt the best idea. Every moment here came at a risk which begged the question, why hadnt the cleric invited them to his awakening room.

Oh, crap!

Dallion shivered at the realization. Out of all the possibilities, only one was likely doing so would put them at an even greater risk. Now it became absolutely clear why Kalis had freaked out to such an extent when Dallion had linked his awakening room during their first training session the chainling had the ability to enter the rooms of others, which meant it was an awakened beast as well.

The chainling is still wounded, Dallion began. If it wasnt it wouldnt bother with long range attacks. Its also fast enough to kill anything thats close. Or so the state of the caravan suggested. However, it cant focus on two things at once.

The Cleric remained silent.

Im guessing its next to impossible to flank the creature.

Definitely impossible for you.

So, we dont try. Instead, we charge straight at it.

Wha? Veil gasped.

If stares could drill holes, Dallion would have been Swiss cheese by now. It wasnt only the Cleric who was skeptical of his plan, Gloria was as well. Dallion could see her frown of disapproval, along with a hint of embarrassment that she was acquainted with him. Only Veil was giving the idea some actual thought, wondering whether he could pull it off or not.

We dont need to kill it, just wound it, Dallion quickly added. That would be enough for the Dame to finish it off.

There was a long moment of silence only broken by the sound of another piece of burning wagon slamming a short distance away. Apparently, Dame Vesuvia had decided to shorten the distance to the monster.

Its now or never, Dallion urged. Maybe it was because of the echoes, maybe it was part of this worlds society, but from what he had seen so far in this world, people rarely bluffed.

How do we wound it? The Cleric asked.

So far so good,

You can make us invisible, right? Dallion turned to the Cleric.

Dont rely on that. The chainling doesnt need eyes to see us coming.

Thats not to hide us. Its to give us a bit more time. Veil, youre good at throwing things, right?

Maybe? the blond said, suspicious of the question. When we get near, I want you to throw your sword at the chainlings head. Aim for the eye. Can you manage that?

I can hit a target from a hundred feet, Veil boasted. Remaining humble regardless of the circumstances remained alien to him.

The chainling will easily deflect it, Gloria crossed her arms. Just like the practice guardian did in training.

I know. Dallion smiled. Im counting on that. So, everyone ready to go?

There were a few silent nods. A plan had come together a very risky plan, but even if half the things of the chainling were true, that remained the best option Dallion could think of. That as well as the Dame taking it on her own. Either way, it was time to act.

Follow me! Dallion rushed forward.

The rest soon followed. Dallion could hear the steps of Veil and Gloria as they ran close behind him. The Clerics presence had vanished, as if he had deserted them. The semi-transparent quality that Dallions legs and arms had acquired, though, suggested that he was nearby.

The group reached the top of the hill, then continued down. Seconds later, Dallion got his first view of the chainling. All this time he had speculated as to the nature of the creature: large, small, scaly, bony, furry. Each whisper hed heard added a new element, making it grow in size and ferocity. From

experience, Dallion knew there was no way for all the rumors to be true. However, even he wasn't prepared for the sight that emerged.

Standing next to a half-wrecked wagon, setting objects on fire and hurling them in the air was something. There was no way to consciously describe it, as if the creature was nothing given silhouette form. It had an elongated body with several legs the number changing each time Dallion tried to count at least a dozen tails and a single eye the size and shape of a bowling ball.

When a creature's leg came in contact with an object, the object instantly became part of it, then burst ablaze, moments before it was hurled in the distance. It was as if the creature was throwing parts of itself at the main force of the hunting party. Dallion's stomach churned as he imagined what might happen if any part of the chainling came in contact with him. Maybe he was a bit overly optimistic about this.

Chapter 48: Battlefield Modification

Dame Vesuvia charged forward. A large group of soldiers followed, running on foot. What little remained of the volunteers was long forgotten. Neither as disciplined nor as prepared as the main force, they had suffered the greatest number of wounds and casualties.

This was going to be the final confrontation. The chainling realized it as well, for it spun around gathering as much of the wagon remains as it could and throwing them all at the incoming group like an artillery barrage.

Looking at it from a distance, Dallion was able to appreciate not having to be the one leading the charge. He was also relieved at the ease with which the Dame pierced through the wall of flame. There was nothing flashy he could see, no glowing lights, or materializing shields the woman just passed through as if walking through a sheet of paper.

Veil, can you hit it? Dallion asked. Even if the chainling wasn't looking in their direction, Dallion had gotten far closer to it than he would have liked.

A bit more.

That wasn't the answer Dallion was hoping for. They were still about a hundred feet away. According to his theories, the chainling was unlikely to pay attention to them until it had dealt with its greater threat. The concern was that their involvement could quickly change its mind.

When Veil throws the sword, grab my hand, Dallion shouted. You too Cleric.

Why? What are you thinking? Gloria asked.

Later. When I tell you, I want you to aim for its throat. Don't shoot until I say so.

Okay, but why

Do you have your dartbow?

Yes, I have it, but what

Before Gloria could finish a loud pop filled the air. It was just like the pop of the balloons sudden, sharp, though not overly loud; it was also accompanied by a radical change in the chainling's appearance. Spikes appeared all over its smooth silhouette piercing it off, like a porcupine shedding

the skin of a snake. The new form was larger than before, darker, sleeker, covered by what could be described as an external skeleton of metallic bones.

Veil, do it now!

I cant be precise from this distance.

You dont have to be precise! Just aim for the head!

With a grunt, Veil leapt into the air. Letting go of his dartbow, he grabbed the sword with both hands and spun it around mid-flight, as if it were a throwing hammer. Two revolutions later, he let it go.

As the sword made its way towards the chainling, Dallion held his breath. The moment of truth had come.

Cleric, stop the invisibility! Dallion shouted. Gloria, aim!

The girls arm appeared out of nothingness, holding a dartbow. With perfect precision, Dallion put his hand on top so his pinkie finger barely touched the bolt, while still holding his own weapon.

Everyone, grab hold! Dallion extended his free hand.

In normal circumstances no one would have obeyed his command. The play was reckless to the point that even a five-year-old would notice. After running for about a minute, pumped up on adrenalin, though, instinct proved stronger than logic. Dallion felt two sets of fingers grab on, touching the flesh of his hand. To his surprise, a third hand grabbed hold of his neck. Someone was aware of his plan and was going ahead with it.

I hope Im not wrong.

At that point the sword hit. There wasnt any blood or anything spectacular. The tip of the blade struck the side of the chainlings new skull, cracking the bone, just before bouncing off. The creature semi-stumbled, pushed back to the side by the force of the blow, but quickly regained its footing. The head with the large single eye turned around to take a good look at its attacker.

Shoot! he shouted.

The instant he felt that the bolt was released, Dallion did what he had planned all along.

Item awakening

Everything disappeared. Dallion found himself in a rather large hall. Gloria, Veil, and the Cleric were all there. Thankfully, the chainling wasnt.

The BOLT is Level 15

You are in a large metal hall.

Defeat the guardian to change the BOLTs destiny!

This was your plan? Gloria all but shouted. Getting us here so we could improve the bolt?!

Pretty much. Dallion grinned. Something suggested that Gloria wasnt taking this all too well. Actually, the only reason she wasnt outright furious was that she was still trying to wrap her mind round the idea of it all.

Have you any idea what it takes to improve sky silver?

No, but Im about to This was the first time he had heard the term.

Sky silver is one of the most stable elements there are! Why do you think weapons are made of it? If it was normal metal, anyone could turn the weapon to rust the moment it touches their skin.

Oh. That actually was a pretty neat trick. Dallion had to remember it for later. Not that he had the skills to modify metal yet.

Did you seriously think this through?! Gloria crossed her arms. Her face was red with anger.

Gloria frowned, refusing to acknowledge his logic.

Thats why we wont be improving the bolt. Well just modify it.

Modify? Veil arched a brow. Isnt that the same as improving?

Is mending the same as improving? Dallion smiled.

The question made both Veil and Gloria hmm, though only Veil made the sound out loud.

If we can mend things of a greater level, we can also damage them to some extent? Dallion turned to the cleric. Also, the bolts arent made of sky silver, only the tips are. The rest is common metal. Thats what well be changing.

You want to modify the metal shaft of a bolt? For the first time there was a softer tone in the Clerics voice. Dallion could tell he was intrigued by the idea, possibly eager even.

Precisely! And youre going to help.

Chapter 49: Rocket Bolt

Walking through the bolt was different from what Dallion expected. While sharing a lot of similarities the starting point, the guardian room, the mending maze each had its own set of peculiarities. The guardians tended to be a reflection of the items owner, or owners. Glorias ring guardian was strong, but also fair and kind, those of the items in Dallions home were simplistic, but encouraging, and the rocks he had taken from the river were wild. However, it was the mazes that were the greatest difference. Each had a different shape, incorporating the items true form, and as Dallion had found out, there was a direct connection between the damage on the outside and that in the labyrinth.

The labyrinth of the bolt turned out to be a tower composed of multiple smaller labyrinths placed on over the other. Initially, there wasnt even an indication the starting room led directly to the guardian arena. Yet when Dallion had shot at the connecting archway with his dartbow, the archway had transformed into a stairwell, shifting the guardian room to the top.

How did you think of this? Veil asked, impressed.

Its something my mother told me, Dallion replied.

To be honest, hadnt given the matter much thought thanks to the echo, not that he had many opportunities to do so up till now. The entire time in the village had been spent learning skills basics in preparation for the chiefs tasks. Looking back, Dallion was almost annoyed at the time he had wasted doing mundane things instead of experimenting and pushing the limits of his skills.

She said that some people liked to damage items for the fun of it.

Well Ive damaged a lot of things, Veil said with pride.

Dallion felt like shaking his head. Some things never changed.

Ive never done it from the inside, though. Id just chip off a part of the thing then go into the labyrinth to do more damage.

That shut Veil up as he darted an annoyed glance at his sister. Noticing it, Gloria raised her chin in a smug expression. Typical sibling rivalry at its best.

What is your plan? the Cleric asked.

Its simple. All we have to do is cause enough damage in every third floor so that the bolt holds together, but the bolt is on the brink of shattering. When the chainling grabs the shaft of the bolt, the tip will continue on.

The only reaction Dallion got were blank stares. For some reason no one saw the significance of what he had just said, and yet it was so obvious. Dallion had seen that in lots of videos. It was the same principle with arrow heads more or less. Maybe he wasnt explaining it right?

Look, the bolt is already in flight, all well do is just break it up a bit so that the chainling cant stop it. At worst, itll get sprayed by metal fragments. At best we can kill it on the spot. Dallion paused a moment. Maybe the last bit was pushing it too far. At best we can wound it for Dame Vesuvia to kill off quickly. That sounded much better.

So we need to bash up parts of the labyrinth? Veil was the first to break the silence.

I dont get it. Veil shrugged. No prob in smashing things up, though. Coming, sis?

Gloria gave a Dallion a long stare, then just sighed.

I hope you know what youre doing, she said, then followed her brother.

There really is no downside, Dallion shouted as the siblings started their climb up. Just dont break too much, okay?

Part one of his plan had started. Originally the next part involved them doing the same at least twice more once for each of the bolts he was about to fire, and if lucky for a few reloads. They werent going to be happy about it, but better a few days of grumbling alive than a calm death. The Cleric, though, was a huge unexpected bonus. Dallion didnt imagine hed be there, or that hell have magic. Now the odds of this attack being a success had increased exponentially.

Seconds passed. Dallion calmly waited for Veil and Gloria to climb up and get well out of earshot. Beside him, the Cleric silently did the same.

Any reason we have to wait? the albino asked.

Shh! Dallion rose a finger, still looking up.

I can stop sound just as I can stop light.

Oh Now he felt stupid. Right. I didnt think about that. Can you heat things up as well?

Heat, freeze, harden, soften What exactly do you know about magic?

I know a bit. Most of it was through games, cartoons, and roleplay sessions. In Dallions mind it still had to count, though. After all, magic was nothing but a set of principles common principles, even. Know any good spells?

No.

The word was said with such a lack of emotion that Dallion suspected something to be off.

While the Seven blessed me with the power of magic, I have proven unworthy to attain the skills to use it adequately. I can only affect change in items and areas. If I knew spells, you and I wouldnt be having the conversation.

Because youd have killed the chainling on your own? Dallion felt the urge to take several steps back. Even with his perception of four, he could spot bitterness in a person, and the Cleric was definitely bitter.

Because I wouldnt have been sent on this mission at all. Who do you think improved the Initiates blade?

Dallion remained silent.

know about magic, what is it you want me to do?

Any chance you can make the bolt invisible?

It wouldnt matter. The chainling would still see it.

Any chance you could make parts of the bolt shaft heated? Like super heated?

Easily. Why?

I want to make the bolt into a rocket.

Hmm?

During his life Dallion had heard a lot of terrible explanations, but they paled in comparison to what he had uttered just now. Trying to simplify something complex that he took for granted sounded like a drunken gibberish.

Err, I mean

I know what a rocket is, the cleric interrupted, saving Dallion from his misery. How do you know, though? Other than the Order and the Imperial family, only a handful of nobles know the secret. Are you saying you know a way that would change a dartbow bolt into a rocket?

How old are you? The Cleric narrowed his eyes. In true years.

Twenty-two. You know a lot for a person your age. The faintest of smiles appeared on the albinos face. What exactly do you need me to do?

Chapter 50: The Chainling

Labyrinth section damaged!

Overall completion 37%

One more to go, Dallion said in an attempt to cheer up the rest of the group.

The plan, innovative as it was, had been received with a lot more enthusiasm a few hours ago. At this point everyone, Dallion included, just wanted to get it over with. Fifteen floors five of which had to be damaged in very specific fashion. If there was a definition of poor mans crafting, this was it.

So far all of the sections had been modified according to specifications, including the Clerics temperature adjustment. Dallion wasnt completely sure that a sudden heat source within a bell shape would create the equivalent of an explosion, although according to his internet knowledge it was supposed to. Having something heat up so much almost instantaneously had to have the same effect. Either way, they would soon find out.

I definitely hope I dont have to make everyone go through the same without any results.

The final labyrinth was located just under the bolts guardian chamber. While Veil was destroying certain walls of the labyrinth with alarming speed and efficiency, Dallion took a peek. As expected, the guardian wasnt there.

How certain are you this will work? Gloria asked.

Fairly certain, Dallion lied and instantly regretted it. For a moment it had slipped his mind that the girl was a walking lie detector. Somewhat certain, he corrected himself.

Glorias expression remained unchanged.

Hit or miss, we must be ready for whats to follow, Dallion went on. Once we return to the battlefield, stay close. I might need you to modify my other two bolts.

There was a loud groan.

Im just saying.

If things get bad, Ill take care of things. The Cleric said with a pensive expression. You just run and dont look back.

What about you?

The Seven wont allow me to be killed.

That wasnt encouraging.

Veil? Hows it going? Dallion asked.

Final punches, Dal. A loud slapping sound echoed throughout the room. Dallion had no idea what Veil had done to be able to break metal, but he was glad for it. Ready. What do we do now?

Now we exit. Dallion took a deep breath. This would be the first time hed go from a calm state to an intense sprint. Everyone ready?

All but the Cleric nodded.

Good enough, Dallion thought, and left the bolt. Pain hit him like a sledgehammer as in his mind he accelerated from zero to fifteen miles per hour in zero seconds flat. It would be funny that awakening was the only instance in which the phrase could be used properly if it wasnt for the shock he experienced.

All plans of modifying two more bolts went out of the window as the shock made Dallion stop after several steps and empty his stomach contents.

A loud roar filled the air, sounding like a cross between a lion and a rusty chainsaw. Despite his pain, Dallion looked up. Against all odds, the bolt-rocket operation had been a success. It would have been nice if he had seen the bolt in action, but seeing gushing black from the chainlings chest was the second-best thing.

It actually worked, Dallion smiled. It really actually worked.

COMBAT INITIATED!

Huh?

This wasn't supposed to happen. Rectangles shouldn't appear in the real world, but it was right there, clear as day. Instinctively, Dallion looked at his left hand. There was no buckler there, just the second dartbow he was holding.

As terrifying as this was, however, a realization soon kicked in, making Dallion's blood freeze in his veins. There was only one creature on the battlefield that would want to fight with him, the same creature that had awakened powers.

Craaap!

Dallion jumped back. Both dartbows raised in the air, though no marker lines appeared. At that point the chainling reacted. In a second it moved from its position to a step away. Several of the chest bones were fractured, sticking to the body like pieces of broken porcelain. At this distance, the only course of action was for Dallion to shoot. As he squeezed the triggers, a paw emerged from the chainling's body, thrusting forward.

It was good fun, at least. Dallion had managed to distract the chainling. Heck, he had even wounded it. Now Vesuvia and the Cleric would have a much easier time killing it. At least Gloria and Veil would get back safely to the village, and who knows? Maybe they'd be able to change the chief's mind on a few things.

The village chief. That was one of Dallion's main regrets. He had hoped to have a one to one with the old geezer.

The pain spread through Dallion's chest. There wasn't anything extraordinary about it, it felt very much as if he'd been hit with a pipe or club. If the caravan bodies were any indication it was clear what would happen now flames would burst through Dallion's body burning him beyond recognition, after which

With a loud thump, Dallion crashed onto the ground. A few more seconds passed and he was still there, out of breath, in pain, but very much alive. Just then the combat rectangle vanished.