

Leveling up 51

Chapter 51: The Loss

The chainling jumped away from Dallion, just in time to avoid a series of glowing red knives that hit the ground.

I told you to run. The Cleric said a short distance away, holding several throwing knives. That was both impressive and unexpected. If anything, Dallion thought of him more as a quarterstaff fighter.

Barely had the Cleric made his move than another party emerged. Appearing out of thin air, Dame Vesuvia swung her weapon at the chainling. Faster than the eye could follow, her sword struck the creatures skull, sinking in at least half an inch. A bit further and it could have split the chainlings head, and eye, in two. Sadly, the monsters bones rivaled the Dames sword in durability.

The woman realized this and did another attack, this time from the side. Watching her, Dallion felt like a level one guardian of a cheap wooden bowl. Looking at her, Dallion recognized specifics of the attack skills he had used while improving items. Vesuvia, though, used them on a totally different level. Saying that she used attack skills was like comparing a condor to a butterfly. The instant leap, the multi attack, the disappearing and reappearing act, those were all things that the markers had helped Dallion do in the awakened state.

Three arms with three swords appeared from Vesuvias shoulder. A triple attack. Dallion had never seen one before, but the slight blur around the outlines of her hands told him that it was the extreme speed creating that illusion. Just witnessing it was incredible!

More blades split the air, making their way to the target. The majority were evaded with ease, but this time a few managed to land a hit.

Dallion blinked. A ranged attack had hit its target? And not a rocket propelled ranged attack either. That could only mean one thing the chaining was weakened.

Shoot at it, you idiot! Gloria shouted from behind.

Dallion was already ahead of her, reloading both of his dartbows; and he wasnt the only one. Several more darts flew the creatures way, followed by a charge of soldiers with swords. Considerably slower than the Dame, they flashed in and out of existence, following the same movement technique awakened guard skills offered.

Similar to a knot of frogs only in the most positive sense the main force of the hunting party surrounded the chainling. They were followed, at a distance, by the rest of the volunteers, who like Dallion were shooting bolts in their own attempt to contribute to the battle somewhat.

Everything was moving so fast that Dallion couldnt keep up. The Dame and the beast had evolved to a series of afterimage blurs shifting from spot to spot in the nearby area. The speed was such that he could no longer follow the specifics of the fight, only able to catch an occasional frame of one side landing a blow on the others defense.

Thats what a true awakened is

Keep your guard up! Dame Vesuvia shouted, her words slower than her actions.

Several soldiers tried to pull back, but were too late to avoid the black paw that emerged from the creatures body and slashed right through them. Initially, it looked like a few rips on their tabards. A ball of flame followed, engulfing three people, then knocking them on the ground.

Neither the massive chain mail armor nor the Clerics emblem had done anything to save them. The single chainling attack had left three dead, and things were just getting started.

Keep the line! Vesuvia ordered. Large spread.

This is wild. Veil smiled, looking at the fight with absolute admiration. Only a noble can do that.

It was impossible to disagree. For every five strikes that the chainling blocked, Dame Vesuvia managed to get one in. Slice by slice, it was being pushed back. Each jab, each faint cut weakened it, though not to the extent that it would give up and die. Four more soldiers burst in flames.

Shes weakening, Gloria said.

Come on, Veil snorted. Shes winning. Just look.

I am looking, the girl hissed. And Im telling you shes getting weaker. Her hits arent landing as well as they did at first. And the soldiers are incompetent.

The words were harsh, but ultimately correct. Only the Cleric was of any use. When he ran out of throwing knives, the albino took his staff and switched to melee combat. His actions were by far not as impressive, though he still managed to keep himself from getting hit, and on occasion strike the chainling.

Theyre not that bad, Veil crossed his arms moments before another one burned up. This universe definitely had a wicked sense of humor. Dont look at me! I didnt cause it. The blond stepped back, defensively.

Think! Think! Think!

Dallion focused on the fight. From what he was seeing, he agreed with Veil that the Dame would most likely win but could he leave it at that? If there was a chance of failure, he had to think of something. At this point, the more reckless the better.

The chainling cant change the weapons, right? He turned to Gloria.

What?

Sky silver. Things made by it cant be changed through awakening, right?

Well, it might be possible in theory, but its extremely difficult. Thats why they forge them instead of trying to improve them much faster that way.

In that case, I have an idea.

Without warning, Dallion rushed forward straight at the battle. Vesuvia and the chainling kept flashing in and out from spot to spot, slightly slower than before. Both were focused on their immediate opponent, pretty much ignoring everything else.

Cleric! Dallion pointed his dartbows forward. Help me modify two more bolts!

It has to work! It has to!

Just two more hits and we can take the chainling down! Dallion yelled as loud as he could.

The quarters of the surviving soldiers glanced in his direction. For a single moment their curiosity bested years of training, diverting their attention to see what the commotion was about. So did the chainling.

For a split second it turned its head towards the boy, giant eye meeting those of Dallion. It would have taken a thought for the creature to reach him and slice his head off, finally punishing the human that had hurt him. Before it could, Vesuvia thrust her sword deep in its throat.

You lose, Dallion smiled. The creature was highly intelligent, as he suspected, and it also held grudges. Now the grudge was gone, along with its life.

Chapter 52: A name of his own

You're lucky you aren't part of my troops, Dame Vesuvia went on. Rushing towards a chainling with that level of training. If it wasn't for the Cleric, you'd have been a pile of charred flesh.

Dallion kept quiet. He'd only been part of the hunting party for several days, and already he felt like some things never changed. After the fighting was over, several people had received praise from the Dame as well as some monetary rewards. It came as no surprise for Gloria to be in that group, though Dallion was somewhat annoyed that Veil was part as well. In contrast, Dallion got another earful. Then again, things could have gone far worse.

Eleven soldiers had been killed during the fight, as well as five volunteers crushed by the flaming debris. That composed roughly half of the party. Among the survivors, a third had sustained from minor to serious injuries.

What did you think you could achieve?

There's a saying where I come from. Vesuvia narrowed her eyes. Luck goes to those that least deserve it.

Dallion thought not to snort. This was supposed to be good luck? Dallion was supposed to be starting collegea blissful life of learning and partying. Instead, he ended up in a forgotten medieval village with a mini-tyrant set on sealing the powers of everyone who wasn't immediate family. Not to mention that he had been temporarily drafted to hunt some unknown monster with the ability to set people and objects on fire. Yes, lucky indeed.

You better not be expecting any reward.

No, ma'am, I'm not.

The woman arched a brow.

I meant no, Dame. Nobility titles were all so confusing.

Good. Go get some rest, were heading back in the morning. Real rest.

Yes, Dame. Dallion bowed slightly, then stepped away.

Real rest. Considering where they were, he wouldnt have minded sleeping in the awakened state. The only person who had anything close to a sleeping bag was the Dame herself. The soldiers used their chainmail as a pillow and their tabard as a blanket. Just looking at them made Dallion feel uncomfortable.

With a silent sigh, he made his way back to the nearest fire. With the task completed, and half of the party dead, everyone had dispensed with the division. Only the wounded received special treatment, and given that Dallion didnt have any visible marks on his body, he wasnt considered in need of healing. Interestingly enough, Havoc wasnt either. The large man had recovered remarkably fast, considering what had happened. He seemed quite in good spirits that Dallion and his group had survived, though oddly not surprised by the fact.

Dallion! Havoc shouted. Come here. Saved you some ale. Wasnt easy. He kneed the pile next to him that was Veil. He would have gulped all of it down if he could. Good thing hes such a lightweight.

Given what strength of spirits in this world, it didnt come as a surprise.

Wheres Gloria? Dallion looked around as he sat.

Off to do her business somewhere. Havoc didnt elaborate. So, how did it go?

Oh, we heard. But that doesnt answer my question. How do you think it went?

Not great, not terrible. Dallion shrugged. Im starting to get used to the shouting. I dont see the reason for it, though.

Oh, boy. You really dont know anything about the world, do you? The large man shook his head. Thats the good thing about living in a hamlet it keeps you safe from the bullshit going on. You probably think that being awakened is a big deal, right?

Thats what Ive been told. Repeatedly.

Well, it isnt. Its just an ace in the sleeve good to have, but it wont get you anywhere if not used properly. Havoc moves closer. Youre a peasant, he whispered. The Dame is a noble and a member of the Order. Treating you as an equal for no reason is out of the question. Compliments can only be given through shouting and grumbling. The fact that youre being yelled at, means they see potential in you, possibly enough to treat you as an equal one day.

You think thats possible?

Three things can thrust you in the midst of nobility money, skill, and lineage. Youre not a merchant, and you dont have the lineage, but after what I saw right now, you might have the skills. Youve a long way to go, though. Before anything, you must fully awaken. Then you must make a name for yourself. After that, who knows.

Make a name for myself. That had a nice ring to it. Way better than college. Only now did it dawn on Dallion that there was a whole world out there ready for the taking. He didnt have to go back to the village. He could ask the Dame to become a soldier, or if not accompany the group to some city. The village elder couldnt stop him now with the echo destroyed he had no power.

Keep in mind, though. The higher you climb, the more dangerous youll get. See him? Havoc glanced at the Cleric. Since the battle, the albino had been tending to the wounded. The insignificant amount of magic he had seemed to work pretty well on minor wounds. He was born with magic, so he thought hed rise in the world. He got a lot of attention when he was fifteen, enough to get him a decade of prison and his name removed from existence. He was lucky that the Order took him in. Others werent.

He was forbidden to use his name? Dallion asked.

No, his name doesnt exist anymore. It was taken out of every book and mind. No one could remember it, and even if they did, theyd never be able to utter it. Havocs voice got darker. Anyway, enough dark thoughts. Were supposed to celebrate. He shoved a half-empty waterskin in Dallions hands. Drink up. Theres no telling when youll have the chance.

Yeah, sure.

Chapter 53: The Trip Back

The mood on the way back was very different from what it had been getting here. The further the party went, the happier and more relieved the volunteers became. People smiled more, joked about during food breaks, even started sharing things from their lives. The soldiers, in contrast, became more and more cranky. For them, each step was taking them closer to the crowded, smelly barracks of their garrison.

Training had also changed focus. A day ago, the volunteers grumbled each time they had to face a personal guardian, now they chased after soldiers hoping to learn a few good tips that would set them apart from the people back in their villages. Veil was especially enthusiastic. There wasnt a day he wouldnt spend practicing in and out of awakened state with the goal of achieving level five. The Cleric had made it publicly clear that Veil didnt have what it took, yet, but that had only made the blond double his efforts.

As for Dallion, he still hadnt made up his mind. He would constantly think about it, putting off the decision for the next day. Kalis had attempted to convince him to join a city guard. His prep talk was very different from Havocs only positive things were mentioned: rights, salary, prestige, training, assurances that they wouldnt go hunting chainlings all the time. The offers were good, but Dallion felt unconvinced.

On the third evening, Havoc and another of the volunteers were dropped off. Dame Vesuvia had decided to pass through the villages based on proximity; Dherma was second on the list.

Goodbyes were said, promises made. Even Veil had reluctantly muttered something that could pass as a compliment. Dallion barely knew Havoc, but the experience made him feel as if theyd been together for months. The same could be said for other people in the party. From experience, however, he knew that in a week everything would be forgotten. People would get back to their daily lives, as would Dallion.

Youre drifting again, Gloria said, joining Dallion a short distance away from the main camp.

Sort of, Dallion kept looking at the stars. Dont you have anything to discuss with the Dame?

The Dame prefers talking to her horse. Veil joined in as well. At least then theres an intelligent conversation going on.

Idiot. Gloria sighed.

So, what have you been up to, Dal? Plotting some wild plan?

No. Dallion opened his hand, revealing a smooth piece of marble. I was making a gift for my brother.

It was an ordinary piece of rock, but it made Dallion think of simpler times. When he first awakened, a polished pebble was viewed as a treasure. The pride on his parents faces could not be described, as for his brother the child was on cloud nine, as if hed received the local equivalent of a next gen console.

Hmm. How far did you improve it? Veil asked. Level five?

Six. With a bit of effort Dallion could have possibly get it to seven; the dartbow and the emblem gave him a tremendous advantage unavailable to him before.

Not bad. Veil whistled. Ill have to up my game. What do you think? He nudged his sister. Can you get anything that high? Other than clothes, that is.

You should ask the Cleric to reach level four, Gloria changed the topic without warning. You have the skills for it.

Yeah, youre the only one whos still a three. Dont shame the village.

I dont think your grandfather would approve.

No explanations were necessary. Everyone went silent. Both Gloria and Veil felt the need to look away. The sad truth was that despite what they had gone through, things would return to normal once they returned to the village. Even if both of them had dealt with their echoes, no one else in the village had.

You can run off, you know, Veil said after a long silence. Well think of something. Heck, we can say that you died a hero killed by the chainling. Isnt that far off.

Gloria gave her brother a warning glance.

What? It can work. Grandad will chase after him in the city.

Dallion, Gloria whispered. Dont do this.

Dallion just smiled. He had delayed his decision up to now, but he finally had made up his mind. Going to the city and making a name for himself was definitely something he wanted, but before that there were a few loose ends that needed tying up.

Hes not joking. Veils expression had become deadly serious. Grandpa wont be happy about this. If he asks me, Ill have to fight you.

Yeah, you probably would.

Youll lose.

I dont think so. Dallion smiled. Did the Dame let you keep your sword?

Yeah? Veil arched a brow.

Well, then itll be a fair fight.

You maniac, Veil laughed. A fair fight, eh? Better remember that when I pound you into the ground.

Idiots. Gloria turned around and walked off towards the campfires. Clearly, she didnt share the humor.

Dont worry. Shes always been like that. Veil shook his head. Still thinks she can chase her dreams. Thats the real reason shes the familys little princess. Almost as reckless as you. The worst part is, that she believes things can actually change. As if a medal from the Dame would make grandpa change his mind.

Wont it? The Dame is a noble, so

That wont matter. Grandpa already has plans for her. He has plans for me as well. Ive learned since I was a kid the more you struggle, the more difficult it will become.

Cant you leave the village?

We arent like you, Dal. The moment you came for your acknowledgement, I knew. You became different after you went through your awakening. Grandpa saw it too. Thats why hell never let you go. When we return to the village, well no longer be friends.

Chapter 54: Homecoming

Return to your village with the Archdukes thanks, Dame Vesivua said with the dignity of a bored city official.

Just like at the previous village, there was no fanfare, no trumpets, or speeches, not even any medals of recognition. The only reward was a purse of coins for the village chief, given to Veil. The notion that the chief had gained more out of this than Dallion himself burned the boy up inside. What calmed him down was the knowing that there wasnt anything much to spend the money on until the next travelling merchant arrived.

Return the gear that was given to you and return with the Sevens blessings. The Dame finished, then slowly rode off, followed by the majority of the group, leaving only the Cleric behind.

Dartbows and emblems, the Cleric said.

Gloria and Veil handed theirs over without hesitation. Dallion did with fifty percent hesitation. It would have been nice to keep the emblem. With it the village chief would have no hold over him. Dallion could fail a thousand times in an awakened state and still he wouldnt have his powers sealed. Just holding it filled him with power.

I dont suppose I can keep this as a reward? Dallion asked, looking at the pendant in the palm of his hand. It was just a piece of jewelry, a decoration like a game achievement back on Earth and at the same time it wasnt.

No. The Cleric grabbed it. Emblems belong to the Order.

Well, it was worth a try. Dallion let out a forced laugh.

You two head back, the Cleric said to Veil and Gloria. I have something to discuss with Dallion.

First name basis?

Dallion didnt know whether to feel honored or worried. The Luor siblings were of a similar opinion, for they left with as little as a wave. It was better for everyone that way, for one thing it avoided the awkwardness of meeting the village chief. As far as the Luor family, and the village itself, were concerned, they were still supposed to hate Dallions guts.

You never said who taught you how to make rockets. The Cleric pulled down his hood.

No, it wasnt luck. The Cleric put a dartbow in Dallions hands. Emblems belong to the Order, but weapons dont. Its common that some get lost or damaged, especially when fighting something as dangerous as a chainling.

No way! Youre giving me a dartbow? Thats almost as good as getting an emblem.

Yeah, lost, Dallion nodded, unable to keep the grin off his face.

No bolt clip, but that shouldnt be a problem while in the awakened state. Keep it hidden when you enter the village.

You dont need to tell me twice. Dallion tucked it under his shirt. Wont you get in trouble?

Who am I to go against the Initiates orders? Besides, the hunt was a success. In the eyes of the Archduke and the Order, thats all thats important.

Well, I dont know what to say. Thanks Cleric. Using a title instead of a name felt weird. You take care of yourself.

Thank you, Dallion. The Cleric pulled his hood back up. Blessings of the Seven.

This was entirely unexpected. Dallion couldnt contain his joy. Part of him wanted to rush back home and show everyone what hed received as well as mention that he was the one who had killed the chainling, of course. Sadly, he couldnt do any of that. After a serious conversation with Gloria and Veil, the three had decided to keep the events a secret. On the one hand, that would help hide Dallions actual strength from the village chief, and on the other the Luor family would get all the glory from the hunt. In no way was it fair, but it was practical.

The village seemed in a far worse state than when Dallion had left. Objectively, that wasnt true. Everything remained in the exact same state as it had been a week ago. The knowledge Dallion had gained by destroying the echo, though, made it look an even greater dump. Back when Dallion was a child, the houses had been in much better shape and didnt have to rely on awakened challenges to get mended.

Brother! Linner rushed at him. The boys energy and enthusiasm appeared to be among the universal constants. Youre back!

Hey, Lin! Dallion scooped his brother from the ground and put him on his shoulders. Ever since he had improved his body stat, the child had felt as light as a feather. How have you been? Behaved well, I hope?

Of course! Lin grinned. Of course, Dallion knew that was hardly the case. His brother was a constant handful. So, what happened? Were there monsters? Did you fight a lot?

How about we leave that for a bit later, okay? Dallion laughed. Im sure mom and dad also want to hear.

Okay but not too long!

Dallions parents greeted him in a much more reasonable way. His mother, visibly relieved at his safe return, managed to hold back her tears. Meanwhile, his father itched to give him a bear hug, only deciding against it since Linner was on Dallions shoulders. As it turned out, sometimes carrying ones brother came with unexpected benefits.

Wheres grandpa? Dallion looked about.

He and the other elders were called to the chiefs house when the young master Veil arrived, Dallions father explained.

We were scared that you hadnt survived, Dallions mother explained. Bless the young master for telling us youre coming. He even gave us a copper coin to celebrate the occasion.

Yeah, hes all heart. Did the chief call for me?

No. Dallions mother shook her head. The elder convinced him to delay that for tomorrow. You have today to spend with us.

Great. That means Ill get to hear everything that happened while I was gone. And also, Ill tell a few stories of my own.

Yaaaay! Linner yelled with joy from Dallions back.

And when were done talking, Ill go do some practice with an old friend.

Chapter 55: Sand Dragon's Return

The day passed in the medieval equivalent of partying, very much like the time Dallion had first awakened. There was lots of food, by local standards, a healthy number of people, as well as lots of talk and laughter. However, it also seemed different. Lacking the echo, Dallion could feel the fakeness of it all, as if he had been put in a tv drama in which everyone played their own roles. The smiles seemed fake, the questions seemed shallow, even the peoples reactions appeared predictable, almost rehearsed.

Dallions mother was the only exception. Only now was he able to see her actual degree of sadness. When he left the village, he thought that she was just being quiet. Now, he could see the truth beyond that.

What happened to the beast? Dallions father asked. Did you skin it?

Others did, not me.

Dallion had long since stopped correcting that he hadnt gone hunting some wild animal, but an awakened monstrosity. Ultimately, there was no point. The echoes had done their task, changing the perception of events in real time.

The massive hunting party became a group of neighboring villagers, the Damea village chiefs sister. As for the chainling itself it varied between a wolf, bear, or a really large wolf. In the eyes of Dallions family and neighbors, he had merely helped out the Luor family deal with a local nuisance outside the village.

I liked the story with the monster better, Lin pouted. For some reason, he was one of the few who remembered the original story. Maybe it had to do with his age, or the child really had an active imagination.

Yep, the creature was a great monster. Dallion winked. And tomorrow Ill tell you about it more, but now I must go out for a bit.

Go out? All the cheer suddenly stopped as everyone stared at him. What do you mean, son?

Oh, I just wanted to walk about the village a bit before I went to bed. Nothing to worry about. I feel as if I havent been here for so long that I want to get to know it again.

Right, right. The large smile returned to his fathers face. Yeah. I remember when I first went on a hunt to catch a boar it felt like Id been gone for days.

From what Dallion had learned during the hunt, Dherma was the only village to be so isolated. It had been decades since people frequently went from one village to another. At present that luxury was reserved only for the Luor family and their counterparts. It came to no surprise that the other village chiefs were in control of their villages, but only Luor had turned into a petty tyrant.

Yeah, Dallion let out a clumsy laugh. Leave some food for me? I might have another bite when I come back?

Of course, Dallions mother nodded. Just take care of yourself, okay? Its after dark. I dont want you to come back too late.

Yay! Thanks, brother! Youre the best!

Thats what big brothers are for.

With a smile and a wave, Dallion quickly left the room. Once outside, he could finally let out a sigh of relief. At least he didnt have to pretend anymore, and if all went well by tomorrow evening no one else would have to pretend either.

Making sure that no one was watching him, Dallion made his way out of the village and to the river. From there he sprinted to the cave of the awakening shrine. All the way, he wondered if hed find Gloria there. The girl was good at sneaking out of her home just as much as he was. Unfortunately, when Dallion entered the chamber, he found that he was the only one.

You are in a small Awakening shrine.

Complete the trial to improve your destiny.

Im back, Dallion said out loud. He had no idea what would happen, but he just felt like doing it.

The awakened space of the shrine felt simplistic compared to the gyms he had been training at. The difference was more than apparent. This was a low-level awakening shrine that didnt even reach double digits. Even so, there were a few levels to be obtained here.

Dallion took the dartbow out from his holster, then turned around and walked towards the pair of columns in front of him. A very familiar archway with the roman number four appeared.

Shrine trial 4 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

Sand dunes formed around him as far as the eye could see. All that remained was for the sand dragon to appear.

Darude sandstorm dragon, Dallion chuckled to himself. Back when he had helped Gloria defeat it, it had seemed like such a vast achievement. Since then he had made many attempts to best the guardian on his own, none of them successful.

SHRINE GUARDIAN

Species: DRAGON

Class: SAND

Statistics: UNKNOWN

Skills:

Weak Spots: EYES

A white rectangle appeared over a sand dune. Moments later, the massive form of the sandstorm dragon emerged. The monster glared at Dallion, massive eyes gleaming with the confidence of one who had remained undefeated.

Its me again. Dallion smiled. Fancy another attempt?

The sand dragon roared, filling the surrounding air with fine dust.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion didnt waste time with poses. Following the ranged attack marker, he aimed at the dragons eye and squeezed the trigger, then again, and again. Three bolts shot hitting their target with deadly accuracy.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 150%

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The dragon let out another roar. Dallion quickly shielded his upper torso with his buckler. Instead of attacking, however, the guardian dropped to the ground like a giant sack of potatoes.

You have broken through your fourth barrier.

A blue rectangle appeared.

The dragon that had seemed like a brick wall, the same that had stressed out Dallion for days, had been killed with six shots just like that? How could this happen?

I guess this might take less time than I thought

Chapter 56: The Fifth Trial

Collected

Being calm and dispassionate often helps in difficult situations, although theres such a thing as overthinking.

The rectangle brought a smile to Dallions face. For one thing he knew every achievement rectangle to be associated with a stat boostmind in this case, judging by the wording of the text. Also, described as both reckless and collected, created an interesting existential paradox. Would the two qualities cancel each other out? Or would they complement each other in some strange and peculiar way? Hopefully, time would tell.

Dallion didnt have to wait for long. The moment he tapped away the rectangle, the standard leveling choice emerged before him.

You are Level 4

Choose the focus you value the most.

Four options emerged before him. The numbers had significantly grown since the first time he had appeared in this world. Dallions mind had grown to an astonishing nine. If he ever managed to get back home, he wouldnt have a problem with exams. Reactionwhich was his prize statremained at eight, while body and perception were equal at four each. As tempting as it was to increase it to nine as well, Dallion hit the white rectangle symbolizing perception. He had seen the advantage it could have in combat, especially paired with a ranged weapon.

Once the choice was made, the sea of dunes vanished, replaced by the columns of the shrines awakening area. Becoming a level four was a cause for celebration in itself. Dallion had achieved in a few weeks what others in the village had spent years on. At this point he could call himself equal to Gloria and Veil, but that wasnt enough. The village chief remained stronger. If Dallion was to successfully challenge him, he had to up his game as well.

Dallion took a step to the right. A new archway formedarchway number five. Dallion had no idea what he would find there. Before joining the hunting party, he had tried entering, out of sheer curiosity, only to find an empty sky. Maybe the awakening shrine didnt consider him ready to present him with its next trial? If so, would it now?

Lets see what you have for me, Dallion stepped through.

Shrine trial 5 chosen!

Prepare for combat!

Dallions heart skipped a beat. This was it the final level of the shrine, if his grandfather was to be believed. Given the jump in difficulty between the third and fourth test, Dallion expected something terrifying.

Taking a defensive pose, bracing himself for what was to come. Unlike the previous locations, this one was hidden by a thick white mist.

The third one was related to water, the fourth to fire, which meant that this one had to be
Oh, crap.

As the mist cleared up a bit, Dallion found himself standing on top of a large cliff. Also, the mist wasnt mist it was a cloud.

A strong breeze swept through the area, revealing more of the surroundings. The cliff turned out to be a chain of sharp mountain peaks connected to each other through a series of thin windy paths. The ground wasnt visible, in fact Dallion wasnt sure there was a ground, just an endlessness of sky and clouds above, below, and all around.

Good thing I have a ranged weapon, Dallion went to the nearest edge and looked down. Fighting anything here with a sword and buckler would have been next to impossible. Or maybe it was impossible. If attack was a group of skills, maybe the shrine was built to ensure that a person had experience in all kinds of attack skills, ranged included.

A series of hawkish cries filled the air.

Logically, that was the only thing that made sense. Every trial guardian so far was linked to the surrounding environment. In a wide open space the obvious choice to have something that could fly eagles, harpies, maybe even some type of winged dragon. Whatever it was, Dallion was ready for it.

Taking a quick look around, Dallion went back, looking for a path up the mountain peak he was on. Given how high he was, he had no intention of attempting to climb, although if there was a safe route, getting access to the high ground was preferable.

COMBAT INITIATED!

A red rectangle emerged, marking the start of the trial. With no time to climb, Dallion directed his attention towards the vast space around him. Scattered clouds were still covering most of the sky making it difficult to spot any enemies. Or rather, they might have made it difficult if he hadnt improved his perception.

It took less than a second for him to spot several black outlines beneath a cloud surface. This was the first time in Dallions life that he saw an actual flock of eagles emerge in the distance. Each eagle

was the size of a man with a wing span at least eight feet long. Without hesitation, Dallion drew his weapon and took a shot.

With a screech, one of the eagles dissolved in a puff of feathers, disappearing from view. Several more soon followed, shot out of the sky with extreme precision. At this distance most people would be hard pressed to see the target at all, but thanks to Dallions attack markers and improved senses, hitting them felt as easy as playing a computer game. In some aspects, maybe thats what awakening was? In a very magico-fictional fashion, of course.

Less than a minute later, the flock had been reduced in half. Initially there was a moment of silent rejoicing on Dallions part, but soon it was replaced by concern. There had been over a dozen hits so far, and yet not a single rectangle to show for it.

Dallion lowered his dartbow. The flock of eagles continued rising up, then flew away, completely disinterested in his presence. That was mildly surprising, though definitely not as surprising as what followed.

A giant hand of stone appeared from beneath the clouds a short distance away, and grabbed one of the mountain peaks. Another hand followed, and another, and another. A giant statue emerged, dispersing the clouds with its mere movement.

TRIAL GUARDIAN

Species: GRAND COLOSSUS

Class: GRANITE

Statistics: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- **Quad arm attack**

- **Earth shaker**

- **Stone cutter**

Weak Spots: Ears

Now it became clear why so few people in the village had completed the fifth trial.

Chapter 57: Fighting a Mountain

Size really wasnt considered a factor in the awakened state. Dallion had fought large creatures, enormous creatures, large creatures that could become enormous upon merging in a group, and

nowgigantic creatures. The challenge limitation made so much more sense now. Without a ranged weapon there would be no way to defeat the guardian, although maybe Gloria might have a chance with her acrobatics skills.

If I dont get any new skills at the end of this combat, theres no justice in this world! Dallion shouted, in the hopes that the shrine would take note. That was a problem for another day, though. At present, he still had to actually defeat the colossus.

Bolt after bolt hit the giant head only to bounce off, or sink in the stone of the guardians face like a fashionable piercing.

According to the large white rectangle above the guardians head, the weak point was supposed to be ears, but so far Dallion had received no indication that to be the case. Maybe the goal was to shoot in the ears? That made sense, even if it complicated the task to the extreme.

Suddenly the guardian raised its upper left arm. A massive green cone surrounded Dallion, along with part of the mountain behind him. Immediately, he reacted by sprinting towards the ledge path that connected this part of the mountain to another peak. It was this complete lack of hesitation that saved Dallion from certain defeat.

With one strike, the giant hand sliced the mountain in two. Just because a creature was large didnt mean it was slow.

D-a-a-a-mn i-i-i-t! Dallion shouted, running along the ledge. He had no idea how he was keeping his balance, and he didnt care.

Red markers appeared as he ran, indicating the angle at which he had to hold the dartbow to hit his enemy. Dallion didnt even aim, matching the markers as best he could and squeezing the trigger. He was even tempted to throw his buckler, if he believed it would be of any use.

The recent attack had removed most of the clouds, revealing the creatures upper torso, as well as several peaks in the area.

Dallion knew that there was a way to defeat the colossus, otherwise the awakening shrine wouldnt have allowed the trial. The answer wasnt brute strength, so had to be agility and precision.

From what Dallion could see, the peaks were connected along an arc. More than likely they formed a ring round the guardian. Another interesting fact was that despite the colossus speed, he remained in exactly the same position, still facing the peak that he had just destroyed. The answer was to run to the side of the head and shoot a bolt inside the ear. The only problem was that in order to do that, Dallion had to avoid the guardians four arms.

Maybe if I can whirl the dartbow while I shoot Ill get the bolt to curve?

It was an absurd concept, but considering the logic of this place, it might well turn out possible. One attempt later, it became obvious that some things remained impossible even in a realm of magic.

As he reached the second peak, Dallion expected the guardian to react. To his surprise, there was no immediate attack. The massive face had shifted slightly, looking at Dallion with a faint smile.

Mental images of the realm formed in Dallion's mind as he continued to search for possible solutions. He could try to evade the next attack, then try to leap onto the colossus' hand. If he had acrobatic skills, he might even succeed in running to the guardian's head. Another option was to keep shooting at a distance in the hopes that the bolts would wear the creature down, or possibly provoke it to move closer. What if

Two green cones surrounded Dallion. Quite sneaky on the part of the guardian, and it would have ended up fatal, if Dallion didn't expect it. Rushing forward as fast as his legs would take him, he managed to escape to the next ledge path. The sound of shattering rock filled the air, as a second peak crumbled to rubble beneath the clouds.

There was no way to defeat something like this! There wasn't even a way to reach a stalemate. Eventually Dallion would be left out of strength or out of mountain peaks to run to, and then the guardian would squish him like a bug. And to think that the sand dragon was considered a challenging threat.

How can I defeat a giant as tall as a mountain? Dallion asked out loud while running.

Surprisingly the answer came to him moments later. There was no guarantee that it was the right answer, or even a particularly good answer, but something told Dallion it was worth the risk. All he had to do was reach the next peak.

You're not fighting fair, you know! Dallion shouted. How about some fair play? Take a handicap or something!

Maybe it was the adrenalin rushing through his veins, or maybe it was his imagination, but Dallion could have sworn that he saw the colossus shrug.

Overpowered, cheating jerk! he grumbled as he kept on running.

It didn't take him long to reach the next peak. The guardian had politely allowed Dallion to get there safely or maybe he was just toying with the boy. Either way, things were going to be different this time.

A doorway emerged in the mountain's face just ahead. This was what Dallion was waiting for. Linking awakening states might be bad, but when in an awakening shrine there was nothing to worry about.

How about this, you lump of rock? Dallion shouted as he jumped into his awakening room.

Chapter 58: The Personal Arena

You are Level 4

The rectangle illuminated the room. Never had Dallion been so glad to be in this small dark room. Finally, he could catch his breath without worrying that a ten-foot hand would slap him on the head along with the rest of the mountain.

No wonder the soldiers treated all the volunteers differently. Compared to the fully awakened they probably were like kittens in a tigers den. Thinking back, maybe Dallion could have been a tad overconfident in his abilities. The limiting echo created by the village chief had made him think he was incapable of anything; destroying it had created the notion that Dallion could do no wrong. The current challenge had quickly rectified his opinion of himself, displaying the adequate level of his abilities.

I cant believe I charged at a chainling, Dallion said, lying on the floor.

Dame Vesuvia was righthe had been incredibly lucky. If the chainling hadnt been wounded, if the cleric hadnt been there to protect him, or if there hadnt been a group of double digit awakened, he might very well have ended up dead and charred to a crisp.

.
That was an interesting twistit showed that Dallion had a choice of what weapon to use in his awakened state. Granted, there was no point in giving up the dartbow. However

Dallion went to the attack area and took the short sword from the wall. Then he took the dartbow as well. The sword disappeared from his hand, appearing back on the wall. So much for dual wielding, although maybe when he became fully awakened he might be able to do that.

Two doorways had emerged in the room, one led to where the echo had previously resided, and the other linked the room to the mountain realm of the fifth trial. Dallion could see the colossus glaring at him from the distance.

I bet you feel stupid, dont you? Dallion crossed his arms. A mischievous voice in his brain dared him to move a few steps closer. The more reasonable part of him decided to delay that option for a bit. A short rest after all that running and jumping wasnt such a bad idea. Besides, if this room had changed so much since him reaching level four, maybe other rooms had as well?

Tacking the buckler from the wall, just in case, Dallion left the entry room. The corridor outside, almost identical to the corridor of judgement hed seen upon first arriving here had grown longer. The library room, now lacking a door, was in front of him. However, Dallion passed by it with as little as a peep inside. He was more interested in what was to be found at the far end of the corridor. Dartbow and buckler at the ready, he continues forward.

After fifty feet of columns and torches on the wall that lit up the moment he neared them, Dallion reached a bolted wooden double door. When presented with something unknown and potentially dangerous, Dallion did what virtually anyone else would: put his ear to the doors surface and started to listen.

For seconds, nothing happened. Even with a perception of five, there was nothing to be heard on the other side. Normally, when a door was barred, there was a reason for iteither keeping something in,

or keeping it out. Dallion knew that he wasn't the one being kept in, but he also knew that this was a shrine trial.

So, this comes with level four? Dallion walked to the center. It was a nice place, but not that nice, not yet anyway. There were no targets or practice dummies, just a wide open space surrounded by stone walls.

COMBAT INITIATED!

Three sets of green footprints appeared on the floor. Dallion didn't hesitate, rushing backwards. The moment he did a figure emerged in the center of the arena.

That, in itself, was unexpected. What was more unexpected was that the figure was a guardian a colossus guardian that looked remarkably like the one who was smashing mountains a moment ago. The only difference was that this one was only seven meters high.

The creature glared at the boy, then threw the bolts back at him. They were slow enough to deflect, but proved that the colossus had both high speed and intelligence.

What are you doing here? Dallion kept his guard up. Maybe this was what Kalis had warned him about? Linking one awakened room to another allowed things to move between both. No, not things, creatures. Did you follow me?

The guardian frowned. Out in the mountain realm, it had shown nothing but smug smiles. Here, cold fury emanated from its expression.

Or maybe I brought you here?

How does it feel to be a fraction of your former self? Now it was Dallion's turn to smile.

Chapter 59: Colossal Combat

Fighting the colossus with a dartbow and buckler turned out more difficult than Dallion thought. The more he tried to increase the distance, the more the guardian shortened it, moving as fast as Dallion himself. For every shot that hit the guardian, three were deflected, for every four that hit only one dealt actual damage.

Minutes in, the boy decided to resort to the good old methods of dealing with colossuses a buckler to the head. Initially, Dallion thought that the guardian would block this as well, but to his surprise the shield hit the stone head with a loud resounding clang.

Surprise Attack

Dealt damage increased by 50%

Opponents options to react are limited

There was no way that could pass as a surprise attack, but Dallion had no intention of arguing. Taking advantage of the colossus momentary daze, he rushed along the defense markers. Good thing too, for just as he finished the first set, the guardian began its next attack.

Too late, Dallion whispered. The advantage gained from the first attack easily helped him avoid the next, allowing him to complete another full defense set, then another, and another.

By the fourth, pressure had started to creep in. Thanks to his body improvement, though, Dallion was nowhere near exhaustion. Already he could teleport a significant distance away, even put himself in a good enough position to shoot at the colossus ear. However, he decided to push on. The evasion sequence was much more complicated than before, following a pattern that Dallion hadn't seen before.

Step, step, jump, whirl, bend, twist left

Colossus arms struck left and right, each missing by inches. A moment of hesitation appeared in Dallion's mind, quickly ignored as he gritted his teeth to match the final green footprints. The moment he did, time completely froze.

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to escape combat, smash the window

There's an escape option? Dallion gasped.

That changed everything! It pretty much meant that he could leave a battle unharmed and didn't even have to rely on a pendant. The guard skills were unimaginably good! If people knew about this, they would probably not choose anything else.

Of course, being able to take advantage of this option required that a person had a reaction level to match the marker sequence, and the body to withstand the exhaustion. All in all, it wasn't an obvious cheat.

Dallion looked around. Green footsteps continued to cover the floor. By his speculation, the moment he took a step anywhere the offer would end, and he'd return to his battle. However, given that there wasn't a timer anywhere on the rectangle, Dallion could also remain still for a while to catch his breath and rest.

Here goes, Dallion whispered.

Twisting his body in a hundred and eighty jump, he jumped from green marker to green marker until he was a few feet away from the guardian. From this angle the colossus ear was perfectly visible, it also had a faint red marker on it.

The reason he hadn't seen any markers was because he couldn't see the weak spots. That also explained why Gloria was so good at hitting the training guardian back in the hunting party. With her perception, she could easily see all the weak spots and maybe more.

Taking advantage of the time freeze, Dallion aimed. When the two red dots aligned, transforming into bright orange, he squeezed the trigger.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt damage was increased by 150%

Barely had the rectangle appeared when Dallion shot a second bolt. To his surprise, that hit as well. It was almost like with the sand dragon. Two more critical hits followed before the guardian managed to jump back.

After each successful shot, a momentary time freeze occurred. It was different from the guard skill freeze that Dallion had experienced; this one was far shorter fractions of a second, doubling in speed and only seemed to affect the target.

TRIAL GUARDIAN

Species: GRAND COLOSSUS

Class: GRANITE

Statistics: 17% HP

Skills:

Weak Spots: Ears

Seventeen percent remaining. A few more good shots and Dallion would be the clear victor. Given the new combo, it was pretty much a foregone conclusion. There was nothing the guardian could do but prolong the inevitable. The combo that Dallion had uncovered was as lethal as the colossus in its original realm.

Want us to stop here? Dallion asked. There's no point in going on. You can't win.

The colossus frowned, although didn't move from its position. That was good. At least Dallion wasn't going to face a sudden charge again.

I know you can give up, Dallion continued. I know that I'm not sure what the difference is, but it'll still get me to advance.

There was no reaction.

I really have no problem repeating my attack. I just thought that a surrender would be better.

The features on the colossus face softened slightly. The guardian lowered its arms, then started slowly walking towards Dallion in a relaxed fashion. If this were anywhere else, Dallion would probably have performed his combo attack and finished it. Since this remained an awakening shrine trial, though, he decided to take the chance.

Step by step the colossus approached until it stood in front of Dallion. At this distance one could appreciate how formidable it actually was: seven feet of solid granite with four arms and the speed of a cheetah. Two of the colossus hands moved up, covering its ears completely.

Dallion swallowed. Had he tipped his hand?

Another of the guardians hands extended forward.

With next to no hesitation, Dallion shook the hand, or did as much as humanly possible; it was a piece of stone, after all.

Thanks. The boy smiled.

No sooner had he done so that the guardian disappeared.

The SHRINE Guardian has admitted defeat.

Do you accept his surrender?

Yes, Dallion said.

You have impressed the SHRINE guardian with your behavior!

The Colossus has granted you a future boon.

Chapter 60: Path to Full Awakening

There was nothing glorious in the way Dallion had become level five; he hadn't bested the mountain, nor had he achieved a bone crushing victory. Even so, he was remarkably pleased with the result. Reaching this level had proved to be far more difficult than he had expected; it definitely wasn't as simple as computer games back on Earth had made it out to be. Now, finally, he almost had what it took to challenge the village chief. Only one last step remained.

When given up the choice of what to improve, Dallion chose to improve his body. Despite the clear advantages of a single focus of development, being balanced seemed to be the key. At least at this point he wouldn't be worried about the chief outlasting him on stamina.

Done, Dallion went back to his starting awakening room. The gateway to the shrine was still there, although it no longer led to the mountain realm, but the circle of columns instead. That wasn't the only change. Dallion's room had also grown to the size of a meeting hall. A pity that it remained so empty. Having two weapons and a buckler in such a vast space was quite noticeable.

Time to go for broke. Dallion took a deep breath and left the room.

The moment he did, all six columns shimmered a bright blue. Five of the archways connecting them had become solid walls. Only the sixth remained open; it did not have a Roman numeral, nor any other symbols written on it. Was this part of the test? Now was the moment to find out.

Surprisingly, Dallion wasn't in a new area as he walked through the archway. Instead, an altar emerged from the ground. Moments later, a figure of blue light emerged behind it.

Hello, awakened. The figure shifted, taking the appearance of a woman dressed in a combination of long cyan robes and metal armor. If there was a way to describe her it was a cross between the Greek Goddess Athena and a Valkyrie. Congratulations on passing your initial trial on the path of greatness.

One last task remains, before your full awakening, the woman continued.

Bring it on! I'm ready. Dallion puffed his chest, then mentally froze, realizing he had become like Veil. The realization sent cold chills down his spine. Some things were too horrible to imagine.

The woman narrowed her eyes.

This task is unlike the ones you've done till now. There will be no enemy to best, no beast to capture, no puzzle to solve. No, now it is time for you to face the thing people fear the most.

Err, before that, can I ask a question? Instinct made Dallion raise his arm, as if he were back in school. Thankfully, the woman found that acceptable enough, for she nodded. Who are you?

The question was so cliché that Dallion expected a sarcastic response at best. However, the features on the woman's face shifted in surprise.

You are the first to ask me that in quite a while, she said in a pensive voice. Sadly, that is not an answer that I can give you yet. Instead, I shall tell you what you'll gain should you complete this test.

Strictly speaking that was a clear bait and switch. Dallion didn't seem to mind, though. There was something about the woman that made him feel at ease; a sense of shelter, calm, and hope. Just looking at her made all his questions seem insignificant.

If you complete this test, you'll become a full awakened and gain the power to awaken areas, as well as create echoes of yourself.

The spark of curiosity flashed, burning through the sensation of calm that surrounded him.

I can make echoes of myself? Does that mean that I can place them in the heads of others?

The woman's expression suddenly changed. Thanks to his perception level, Dallion was able to see the scorn written all over her.

That is not what they are meant to be. The womans voice had become as sharp as glass. No more questions, Good luck in your test.

With that the woman disappeared, transforming into blue mist that scattered in the air. Whoever she was, she definitely didnt appreciate the question. Still, Dallion couldnt help but wonder about her relation to the shrine. Could she be a goddess? A guide meant to help the awakened achieve their full potential, or at least become fully awakened? Or maybe just the magic equivalent of a hologram inbuilt in any awakening shrine? Either way, it was clear that the village chief was doing something that he wasnt supposed to.

That old man really is a jerk, an oddly familiar voice said.

Without warning, a new person had appeared across Dallion on the other side of the altar. The concerning part was that the new person also was Dallion.

Huh? The first Dallion blinked.

What? The other Dallion shrugged. Were both thinking it. It wont matter much after I challenge him. Everything will return to normal when that happens.

Yeah, but where you?

Im Dallion, the second Dallion laughed.

Im Dallion! the original Dallion said.

In a way, yes. Youre my echo.

Dallion took a step back and carefully examined his other self. The clothes, the weapons, the buckler everything was a perfect copy down to the scrapes he had received in his last fight. Was this the test? Was he meant to defeat his echo?

You are the echo, the second Dallion sighed, as if reading his mind. This new power definitely will take a while to get used to.

What? Arent you the echo?

Okay, lets play this game. The other Dallion crossed his arms. If youre not the echo, how come I can read your thoughts and you cant read mine?

That was a good question a very very good question. As much as Dallion struggled, he wasnt able to come up with an answer. The logic was ironclad, but it had to be false. There was no way for him to be the echo!

Or was there?