

Leveling up 61

Chapter 61: Dallion's Echo

The prospect of being an echo of himself terrified Dallion. As much as he was certain that he was the real him, there was just enough doubt for him to reconsider. If he was the original, nothing stopped him from leaving the awakening shrine. The echo would remain here, or alternatively vanish, and he would get back to challenging the village chief. However, if he turned out to be the echo, then attempting to leave would make him disappear.

Yeah, its a tough one. The other Dallion nodded. Dont know what to suggest, man. If you want, I can leave. That way youll stay here.

Whats the name of my first

Alabaster, though it was my moms poodle and not my own. The other finished the sentence. Look, I can read your mind. Asking questions wont get you anywhere. Even if I am the echo, Ill know the answer as you ask it.

That was hardly fair! If there was mind reading, it had to go both ways. Dallion moved to the altar. It was a solid piece of multi-colored crystal, identical to the one in the cave chamber, save for the wear and tear. Poking it revealed nothing usefulit would have been far too easy if that had revealed the truth.

So, must we fight each other? Dallion asked.

I guess? The other shrugged. She didnt tell us much. Maybe we just have to prove who is who.

How about a truce?

I thought about that, but would that help?

I dont know. Maybe if we shake hands, something will appear, or well merge in one, or something.

It was a strange idea, but given everything not the worst Dallion had come up with. The other him apparently agreed, for he went to the altar and offered his hand. Taking a deep breath, Dallion shook the hand and nothing happened. Both of them were there, just as before. There was no glowing rectangle, nor any spectacular light effects.

So, whats Plan B? The other Dallion asked.

Dont you have any ideas?

Im not the one that needs convincing what I am. I thought it would be better if you come up with your own plans. Its not like you can keep them a secret from me.

The logic was flawless, just as Dallion would have come up with although the other him was wrong about one thinghe would have trusted an idea that hadnt come from him, as long as it was a good idea.

How to prove that he was someone. This sounded very much like a paradox puzzle. Strictly speaking, there was no way to prove that a person was who they thought they were. Dallion had watched enough movies on the subject to be sure of that. If he were back on earth, maybe the

wonders of technology could compare his genes with that of the other Dallion and come to a conclusion. Lacking that, though

What if we both leave at the same time? Dallion asked.

That way no one would know what to expect until it was over, the other said.

Dallion appreciated the other him approving of the idea, although he didnt like the air quotes his counterpart made when saying no one.

How do you plan on defeating the village chief? Dallion asked all of a sudden.

Huh? Same way youre thinking of doing it.

Just say it, please. I cant read your mind, remember?

Fine, fine. The other Dallion sighed. Ill do it in the morning, when everyone is out there to see. It has to be public, otherwise he might try to chicken out. Probably, hell have me fight Veil first. Not Gloria, though.

And if you have to fight her?

All depends on what happens, I guess. I wont hurt her, but I wont let her win either.

Thats a really bad plan.

Hey, the other Dallion laughed. Its your plan as well. Its not like weve got many options here. This isnt a medieval duel or something. The old man tried to kill us half a dozen times. He waved his hand. Okay, not kill us, he only tried to seal our awakened power. You know that if he manages that, itll be back to having an echo.

Dallion shivered at the prospect. Now that he knew exactly what the scribe was and what he could do, having to bear one again was slightly terrifying.

Anything else, I missed? The other Dallion asked.

Lets go, then.

Dallion waited a few more moments, then slowly made his way towards the arch he had come from. Every step his fears increased. He felt that he was the real one, and he definitely didnt want to disappear. What if refusing to find the other him resulted in Dallion being trapped in the shrine for all eternity?

Reaching the threshold, he stopped. Somehow the dartbow had found itself in his hand. The other Dallion was only a step away. It would be so easy for him to ensure that he would be the one getting out. A single shot and

Hold a sec! Dallion shouted, taking a step back. I have it!

Youre going to shoot me, the other said in a cold voice, buckler raised high. Thats really low, you know.

No, its not. Before the other him could react, Dallion squeezed the trigger.

BOLT WOUND

Health reduced by 50%

Sharp pain came from Dallions leg. However, he didnt mind it. Rather the opposite, he felt relieved. Putting the dartbow back in its holster, he looked at the other him, a smile shining through his pain.

I never said Id be shooting at you, Dallion said. But you knew that, given that you can read my thoughts and all.

Yeah, I knew. The other smiled. All part of the test. He walked back to the altar. Good thinking. An echo can only survive one shot. Good thing that you upped your body. Dartbow bolts are serious business. Next time youre in doubt, just bang your head in the bucklersafer that way.

Right. At least now he knew exactly how much damage a bolt did. Were you in on it from the start?

Duh. I might be your echo, but I wasnt made by you. How else could I guide you? Besides, breaking the fourth wall would have been weird. Now that you know what an echo is, its okay. No hard feelings, right?

He sat on the altar, waiting for Dallion to leave.

Oh, right. The echo laughed. The thing about mind reading. Echoes always read the thoughts of their creators, not the other way around. We have to know what were supposed to be, after all.

Chapter 62: Old Proposals

The shrine altar remained dim after the test. Dallion made several attempts to get back inside, to no avail. At one point he even tried to mend the shrine, hoping to trick it into letting him in, but was still unsuccessful. As far as the awakening shrine was concerned, he had become a persona non grata.

While some more explanations would have been nice, the experience had made Dallion reach certain conclusions. For one thing, the shrines were only the first steps to awakening. They provided a little help, even more hints and references, but few concrete specifics. It was like trying to operate a secondhand television set without a user manual.

It was tempting to assume that the village chief had hoarded the manual or whatever the local equivalent wasto himself, but judging by the overall state of things, it was more likely that it had been lost ages ago. At some point in the past, the Order of the Seven Moons must have had a monastery here, aimed at helping the awakened in this part of the world. Something had made them abandon it. Dallion strongly suspected that the ogre battle in the area was more than a legend.

Awakened fighting giant mountains The notion was scary as it was fantastic. It definitely was more than Dallion could handle right now.

Adjusting the dartbow under his clothes, Dallion left the cave. The stars were much brighter when he came out in the open. The single perception level that he had increased made him feel as if hed entered a whole new world. Sadly, it also came with a strong dose of itchiness.

The closer he got to the village, the more insistently his stomach rumbled. Going through two level ups, even if the first could hardly be called difficult, had left its toll. Dallion felt like he could eat an entire feast along with the table it was on. Hopefully, there would be some scraps waiting for him.

There was no one in the village streets when Dallion approached his house. All the people had returned to their homes, likely under the influence of the chiefs echoes. Dallion spent a while looking around just to be sure, then quietly sneaked into his house. The door had been left unbarred, eliminating the need for him to consider alternative means of entry. What was more, he found that the table had already been set up with food.

The food tasted better than ever. It was just lettuce soup, fresh bread, and baked potatoes, but to Dallion it felt like a feast. As he started eating, a door creaked open. Glancing over his shoulder he saw his mother at the doorway to his parents bedroom.

Does it taste well? the woman asked.

Definitely. Dallion smiled. I really dont know how you do it, mom.

It helps having high perception. Dallions mother made her way to the table and sat across him.

Dallion blinked. This wasnt a topic his mother spoke about often.

Its all right, the woman smiled. Even echoes have their limits. Maternal instincts have a way of convincing them to loosen their hold. She took a piece of bread from the table. Also, the village chief has a lot to feel guilty of.

What do you mean?

The things your grandfather told you not all of them are true. I know youve suspected as much, but it isnt his thought. There are things preventing him from helping you. Even the things he did came at a cost.

I know. Dallion had already had the long talk with his grandfather. He would have continued it now, if the village chief hadnt called all the elders to his mansion under a fake pretext.

The story you heard about me losing my powers also wasnt exactly true. It wasnt a lie not exactly, but there were things omitted that made it false. The woman took a deep breath. I didnt get tricked into improving the ring. Rather, that wasnt the only reason. When the chief learned of my skills, he immediately had grand plans of his own. Knowing how rare music skills are, he offered me to join his family by marrying his son. I refused. And that is when he made his second offer.

Dallion couldnt say a word, listening intently to every word his mother was saying. His mother was offered to marry into the Luor family? He hadnt even considered the possibility. The entire notion seemed so medieval that was beyond comprehension.

He took a metal ring and told me it was to be my wedding ring, Dallions mother continued. It was up to me to choose either I put it on and have him turn it to bronze, or I could improve it myself and

give it to anyone I wished. It was painfully obvious that it was a trap, but the echo made sure I didn't see it. I was young and had just enough of pride and arrogance to think I could manage on my own. The woman stopped, looking away from Dallion.

I just wanted to tell you that I'm proud of what you've achieved, the woman smiled, looking back at her son. I won't tell you what you must and mustn't do, but please follow your heart. Don't get dragged down by others. Life is too wonderful to be bottled away for someone else's sake.

I understand.

His mother smiled. Thank you, she whispered. There was nothing left to add.

Chapter 63: Clash with the Chief

There was something different in the air when Dallion woke up. A few short weeks ago he would dread this day, desperately trying to move beyond level three. Now, Dallion was looking forward to the day that everything would finally be settled.

The house was eerily empty, which was odd even if it was an hour after Dallion's normal waking time. Nonetheless, he went to the kitchen to get some breakfast. Looking among the pots he found one with freshly steamed potatoes, as well as a small bowl of fresh butter. Good thing it hadn't gone bad. Considering that the village didn't have any refrigeration technology, this was a miracle in itself.

Taking his time, Dallion peeled the skin off several potatoes and put them on a plate. Halfway through, he added the butter on top, as well as a pinch of salt, before returning to the peeling. A pleasant smell tickled his nostrils. There was nothing better than potatoes. Pity that he didn't give them as much respect back on Earth.

Nothing better than food early in the morning, eh? a voice asked nearby.

Morning, Veil. Dallion didn't stop peeling. He had heard the chief's grandson approach, although he had to admit the blonde had gotten better at sneaking. Being a level four had its advantages as well. Want a bite?

Veil looked at the steaming potatoes, then shook his head.

Nah, grandpa's mad as it is. Eating with the enemy will only make things worse.

I won't tell him if you don't. Dallion took a bite. Delicious.

Maybe afterwards if you're still in the mood.

The warning was clear. Just as Dallion had prepared for a fight, so had the village chief. After the hunting party he had little choice even with all the echoes, people still considered the boy a hero. While none of them remembered the nature of the monster he had faced, the bore of their stories

became more and more vicious with every story. It was a matter of time before it became as ferocious and dangerous as the chainling itself.

Can I finish this, at least? Dallion asked with his mouth half full.

No. Veil smiled. Just make it quick, okay?

Okay, lets go.

The entire village had gathered in one spot. Dallion expected that to be the main square, or the chiefs mansion. Instead, Veil took all the way to the other side of the village where nothing but a few abandoned houses remained.

This was slightly confusing. There was nothing of importance there, only fields of wheat and potatoes stretched into the distance. What purpose could the village chief have of calling Dallion there? Was he going to ask him to improve the fields?

As he approached, Dallion saw that the crowd was separated into three groups. There was the Luor family, standing tensely near one of the abandoned houses. Gloria was among them, putting on a brave face, as if she wanted to be present. A short distance away, seated on makeshift wooden chairs, was the village council Dallions grandfather, five more elders, as well as Aspion Luor himself. The last group was composed of the common people, waiting quietly for the announcement to take place.

Dallion, The village chief stood up from his seat. So good to have you back. My grandchildren have told me a lot about how you helped in the hunt of the boar. The old mans smile widened.

No prob. Dallion smiled. Without the echo, the chiefs attempt seemed pathetic. How would anyone fall for something as obvious? Glad to have helped.

Aspions smile faded.

As is the duty of any awakened, the chief continued. And while youve just returned from a glorious occasion, we must get back to your obligations to this village.

Let me guess. You want me to repair that building? Dallion pointed to one of the crumbling structures.

Two of them. You were away for a week, so you have two obligations.

Two weeks, huh? Dallion rubbed his chin. Guess theres no arguing with math. Id have to say no, though.

Huh? The chiefs expression froze. This was the first time that anyone had refused an order in decades.

Dont feel like it. Dallion shrugged. Dont get me wrong. Id love to help out in some other way. Maybe do something that everyone in the village will appreciate, not just a few families.

Oh? Aspions smile had vanished completely. There was no point in keeping up appearances at this point. It was clear that Dallion had got rid of his limiting echo, which he couldnt have done if he was as strong as before.

Actually, that was a lie. Its something that everyone except you will appreciate. Dallion narrowed his eyes. Im taking you down, old man.

Dallion dashed forward. His speech and actions had caused enough confusion for everyone present to zone out for a moment. Right now, the chiefs echoes were working in overtime trying to suppress the fact that someone had refused a direct order. All that Dallion needed to do was take advantage of those few moments to complete his attack. A single punch would be enough, was all it would take. Regardless of the chiefs level, his skills were capped. At best, hed be as strong as Veil.

Time seemed to freeze. With every step Dallion saw potential attacks. A frontal approach would be the most expected, so he chose to go with something else. Following the defense sequence, he had been repeating dozens of times in the awakened realm, he dashed past the village chief. Upon completing it, the world froze still.

Got you, old man! Dallion attacked with his fist.

Area Awakening

Chapter 64: The Village within the Village

An awakening area?

Dallion stepped back. The chief was still standing in front of him, eyes glaring with hatred. The village itself, though, had changed. The crumbling structures had not only miraculously repaired themselves, but had grown to the size of towers, drifting apart from one another.

You are in the land of DHERMA VILLAGE

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny

He suspected that there might be an awakened area that encompassed the entire village, but he didnt expect it to be like this. In many aspects the realm resembled the world. If Dallion didnt know better, hed think he was in some neighbouring province of the world. There were vast fields, forests, mountains, even a large lake visible. Interestingly, there also were a number of massive structures, ranging from small stone and wooden forts, to what could only be described as a palace several miles in the distance.

You think you have the guts to challenge me? the village chief asked. He had also changed slightly. A scabbard with a large sword was hanging from his waist, and to Dallions horror a double sized buckler was visible on his left arm. Its your funeral. I only wanted for you to know your place, the man continued through clenched teeth. All you had to do was to accept my authority and do as I asked, and you would have kept your powers. I would have even let you marry into the family, but no, you had to make a scene.

Marry into your family? Dallion frowned. Like my mother did?

She could have if she knew what was best. Aspion narrowed his eyes. But no, she had to be selfish to the end. Just like you. That's the problem with your familyselfish every last one of you. And selfish people need to learn that the good of the many outweighs the good of the few.

Wow, that's rich coming from you. Dallion wanted to take out his dartbow and shoot the village chief on the spot, but managed to keep his calm. There would be time for that later. For the moment there was no point in showing his trump card until he saw what the old man had up his sleeve.

Your grandfather said that once and look at him now. Do you see this? The village chief opened his arms, as if showing the realm around him. This is the village. My village.

Looks a little run down, if you ask me.

As if on cue, a guttural roaring sound came from the nearby structure. Thanks to his perception, Dallion managed to catch a glance of a group of ink-like creatures hidden inside. The creatures were very much different from the beings that were in items, or even in the well. They looked more sophisticated, even if barely, equipped with rough loincloths and crude weapons. It was almost as if Dallion had stumbled on a lair of real-life goblins hiding in an abandoned building.

It takes dedication to keep the village from crumbling, Aspion ignored the creatures altogether. Something you would have noticed if you had looked. Do you think that buildings remain upright on their own? Have you seen anyone repairing them?

There had been several instances when his father had to repair the roof on his own, after a particularly fierce storm. There had been no assistance from the elders or the Luor family, no awakening magic, just a lot of effort and elbow grease. Of course, as a result, part of the roof still leaked to this very day.

Im the one who maintains everything! Im the one who keeps you all safe! Im the one you should be thankful to.

Getting a bit upset there, old man, Dallion smirked. Normally, he was against such behavior, but the village chief deserved it. The only reason you've remained in power is thanks to your echoes. Without them and your family, you're nothing.

Oh? A wicked smile reappeared on Aspion's face.

The moment he saw it, Dallion knew he was in trouble. He had tried to be too cool for his own good, and now there would be consequences. He could only hope that he would be stronger than them.

You're just a child. Aspion laughed. For a moment I was worried that you might actually cause trouble, but now I just realized. You know nothing! He took a step back, then drew his sword. You've no idea how I got to control the village, do you? You think the title was passed down just like that?

The ground began to rumble, slightly at first, but with every moment it became more and more noticeable, as if an invisible giant was making his way towards Dallion.

A village realm is different from a building realm. Yes, you've destroyed my echo, improved the well, and even gone up a level or two. You're not in control of a realm, though. And do you know why?

Dallion didn't like the sound of that. Tense, he kept looking around for the source of the rumbling. His senses screamed that it had to be nearby, yet he still was unable to see it.

In order to improve the wider realm, you must defeat all guardians in the area. As Aspion spoke, the ground behind him began to rise. The village has five guardians in total, each corresponding to a vital part. To gain control of the realm, though more is required. You need sacrifice, dedication, and the commitment that you'll be here when the realm needs you.

A few steps away, the ground had changed into a small hill. Massive arms of dirt emerged from both sides, giving the hill humanoid features.

Being an avid gamer, Dallion had heard that the hills have eyes, but in this realm, they also had arms, legs, and a massive spiked club as well.

But most important of all. The chief's expression lost any trace of humor. From here on, he was about to take Dallion's challenge seriously. To gain control of a realm, you must defeat the key guardian and make him accept you as his master.

Combat Initiated

Chapter 65: Village Guardian

DHERMA VILLAGE GUARDIAN

Species: GOLEM

Class: EARTH

Statistics: UNKNOWN

Skills:

- Earth shield skin

Weak Spots: None

The guardian was definitely not what Dallion had expected. It was an interesting coincidence that he also was a golem, similar to the guardian of the well. The similarities, however, ended there. This guardian was far larger and, by the looks of it, less sophisticated than the stone golem, not to mention remarkably quiet. While the village chief had done all the talking, the golem had remained surprisingly silent, as if waiting to be given orders.

Just my luck

It's hardly a fair fight, Dallion took a step back. Maybe I should get a golem of my own?

There's no such thing as a fair fight. Aspion laughed. A winner must know what to use in order to win.

The village chief adjusted his buckler, then without warning charged forward. Green markers appeared around Dallion. Three sets of defense markers three attack paths the old man could use. It was almost like fighting the practice guardian.

The color of the markers changed. Dallion drew his dartbow as he rushed forward. Calmly he fired three shots in the directions of the chiefs attack paths, while continuing towards the third. It was a tactic he had developed in the hunting group with Veil and Gloria. Ironical that it would be the one he ended up using against their grandfather. Moments later, he fired several more shots for good measure. The purpose of the attack wasn't to earn Dallion the win, but to see how the village elder would react, and the old man didn't disappoint.

With a twist of his buckler, Aspion deflected the bolts with ease. That much was to be expected. He had decades to practice his guard skills, compared to Dallion's weeks. That wasn't a concern, though. During Dallion's practice with Gloria he had quickly found the buckler's limitations no matter what he did the right foot always remained unprotected.

A smile appeared on Dallion's face. Holding his breath he aimed at the spot the attack marker said the chief's right foot would be, then squeezed the trigger. The bolt flew through the air, as if in slow motion, focusing on its target.

The arrow continued on its path, drilling into the soft ground. Before Dallion could figure out what was going on, a green shield marker appeared inches from his left shoulder. Instinct and pure luck made him react without thought, twisting his body so to position his buckler in the position suggested right on time to save him from the sword blow that pushed him several steps back.

You've got some skills after all, the village chief said, breaking his attack. Somehow, he had appeared a few steps away. City guard standards must have gone to the Crippled if they're freely handing out dartbows.

You probably thought you're such a big shot knowing two skills? Aspion waited in place.

That's one more than most people I've seen so far, Dallion lied, all the time keeping an eye on the earth golem.

Guard and attack, the two most common skills. They wont make you a nobles guard with just that. There was unmistakable bitterness in Aspions voice. Your grandfather had mastered three in the first month alone. And he wasnt the only one. Did you think that the title elder was just for show?

Its not the skills, its how you use them. Dallion shot three bolts, then rushed forward. All that he needed to do was hit the chief on the head with his buckler. It wouldnt be an elegant move, but it had served him well. Before that, however, he had to provoke the old man to do a counter attack.

The first two bolts were deflected in quick succession. The village chief then avoided the third, preparing to meet Dallion with an attack of his own.

Green and red markers appeared.

Twist, twist, forward, forward

A second defense sequence was complete. Then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to escape combat, smash the window

Victory at last. From here on there was no way for the village chief to do anything. Dallion could leave the realm here and now, or he could jump to the old mans blind spot and attack. Either way, he would

ESCAPE OPTION CANCELED

A new window popped up, putting an end to the time freeze. What was more, Aspion didnt seem remotely affected, or even impressed. His sword held low, he gave Dallion the look a chessmaster would give a toddler who had just learned how to move the chess pieces.

Nice trick youve picked up, the old man said. But nothing can exit this realm without my permission. You've learned that if youd bothered to ask.

As if youd have told me.

Im not talking about me. Im talking about your grandfather.

Chapter 66: Offer Rejected

My grandfather? Dallion hesitated. Most of the things that Dallion had learned about awakening were from his grandfather. Could it be, though, that certain details were omitted?

He was the one who first obtained control of this area, the village chief said. I guess hes not as reliable as you thought.

Yeah, things like echoes tend to get in the way.

At the moment Dallions concern was how to continue the fight, rather than any information his grandfather might have kept from him. Without the escape option, he couldnt make use of his ultimate surprise attack. To make matters worse, the bonuses of his entire defense sequence had been completely negated.

Youre not leaving here unless I let you.

Give up, Aspion said. You dont even suspect your worth. The people need the awakened. As long as you dont oppose me, you can stay in the village. If you join my family, youll never need for anything.

Options flickered through Dallions mind. Direct attacks had proved inefficient, but what about a ricochet shot? Combination attacks were a thing; if a melee attack could be combined with a defense action, why not a ranged one as well?

As long as you promise me, I wont even ask you to admit defeat. No one can see whats happening here. In the real world, youll continue with your attack and I would think of some nonsense of your bravery proving you suitable for my granddaughter. My echoes will take care of the rest.

Anything so long as I dont cause a ripple. Dallion tested his theory, discreetly aiming at the buckler with his dartbow. It only lasted a fraction of a second, but Dallion was able to see the red line bounce off the metal surface like a laser off a mirror. Part one of the new plan had gone without a hitch. What if I want to leave? Go to a city? I heard that they are the places to be.

We all have to make sacrifices. Youll stay here. Whatever you want will be brought to you. Merchants like the awakened. Several members of my family earn their keep by improving an item or two each time one of the travelling peddlers passes by.

I see. What about him? Dallion pointed at something behind the village chief.

It was the oldest trick in the book. No one on Earth would have fallen for it. However, this wasnt Earth. Whether through habit or curiosity, Aspion turned around to look. And that was the precise moment that Dallion went on with the second part of his plan. Taking advantage of his high reactions, he angled the buckler in such a fashion so a shot would hit his target, then squeezed the trigger.

The bolt bounced off exactly as the line suggested it would. The only time Dallion had seen anything of the sort was when playing virtual billiards. That was only part of the plan, though. A single attack, even if successful, wouldnt amount to much. Moments after firing the shot, Dallion sprinted forward.

Aspion tuned out in time, just as Dallion expected he would, buckler deflecting the bolt in the very last moment. The action, though, had been close enough to trigger the appearance of a series of green markers.

Here we go again.

Step, step, turn, step, twist

The pattern was easy to follow. Dallion went on segment to segment. The village chief didnt seem to catch on, continuing with his attempts to slice Dallion with his sword. Several times the blade passed inches wide from the boys facea scary, yet surprisingly invigorating experience that only made Dallion all the more determined.

ESCAPE TRIGGERED

If you wish to escape combat, smash the window

Finally, the rectangle appeared. Dallion didnt even bother waiting, immediately leaping to a spot on the side of the chief. From there it was one simple swing to do one of his golden classicsshield to the head.

Sleep tight, old man. Dallion grinned, A loud ringing noise followed like metal hitting on metal.

There was a moment of confusion. Could it be that the village chief had a head of steel? Or maybe being awakened for so long had caused him to gain abilities Dallion wasnt aware of. As it became obvious, the answer was very different. Dallions buckler had clashed against nothing else but the chiefs own shield, resulting in the unusual noise.

How? Dallion asked, leaping back.

I told you youre just a beginner in this. There was no hatred on the chiefs face, only disappointment and possibly even pity. Even the gifted need time to develop. You were lucky being selected by the hunting party, but nice weapons and a one-week training course arent enough to defeat me.

Without warning, Aspion jumped into the air. The action was elegant, precise, almost graceful. Looking at it, Dallion had the distinct feeling he had seen it before only last time it was Gloria who had performed it.

Youre good at combining your skills, just as your grandfather was. The chief landed back on the ground a short distance away. But theres only so much you could do with attack and guard. I can do that as well, but also combine them with acrobatics. He leapt forward, swinging the sword as he did.

A series of green lines appeared on Dallion, changing location faster than the boy could keep up. There was no avoiding such an attack. The only option was retreating while deflecting what he could with his buckler.

MINOR WOUND

Health reduced by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Health reduced by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Health reduced by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Health reduced by 5%

The attacks continued like a whirlwind of swords. This was no normal combo, it was something the village chief had trained to do. Halfway through, he paused, letting Dallion take a breath.

One single attack and he had already reduced the boys health by a fifth.

Last chance, Aspion said. Give in, or lose your powers.

I think Ill pick option three. Dallion gritted his teeth.

Suit yourself.

Chapter 67: Weak Spot Found

Fighting was never supposed to be fun. The awakening state had made it feel too much like a game. There was next to no pain, fatigue was slow, and wounds were reduced to a floating notification rectangle. And still the more rectangles piled up, the more scared Dallion became. He always knew that the chief wasnt only for showbeing able to keep every other awakened in check took some doing, however, even he didnt think things would be this bad.

The village chiefs skills were a match for Dallions. In addition, he also had Glorias level of acrobatics, and a variety of ways to combine them. Mixing acrobatics with swordsmanship was impressive enough. Adding buckler moves was astonishing.

Spin attacks, defense push jumps, corkscrew slashes Dallion had to defend against each of them, and not always successfully. When the amount of health reduced reached fifty, he started thinking of alternatives.

Escape was obviously out of the question, however running away in the realm itself was the only option. Deflecting the latest series of attacks, Dallion shot too bolts at the village chief, then dashed away through the fields. The new body level had done wonders on his speed, but just to be on the safe side, the boy took a few more shouts over his shoulder.

That, in itself, was both strange and alarming. If Dallion was in the chiefs place, hed take full advantage of the momentum swooping down after him like a hawk. Either that, or send the earth golem. Why hadnt he, though? Come to think of it, the golem had been a silent observer this entire time. Dallion was pretty convinced that the chief was telling the truth about him being in control of the realm as well as its guardian. It shouldnt have been an issue for the old man to bark a few orders and have this whole fight over with. After all, he himself had said that there was nothing fair in war. If provided with such an overwhelming advantage, why wasnt he using it?

You cant use it, can you?

Dallion thought. Rather, the chief couldnt use the guardian against its will. Most likely he could use it to put up a show, or even for defense, but the guardian had a mind of its own and had decided not to take part in all of this. However, that didnt mean Dallion couldnt.

Feeling tired, old man? Dallion shouted, changing direction towards the lake. Better not strain yourself. Would be embarrassing to pull out your back at your age.

A series of distant footsteps suggested that the village chief had taken the bait and was chasing after him. For someone who spent a lifetime provoking people into making bad decisions, he was surprisingly thin skinned.

If only Dallion had acrobatic skills, he could have jumped and fired a few bolts at his pursuer matrix style. On the positive side, at least the village chief hadn't watched those movies, or Dallion would have been in serious trouble.

Running won't save you, Aspion shouted from behind. No matter where you go, I can tell where you're hiding.

I'm not trying to hide! I just want to see how good you are at swimming, Dallion bluffed. He could only hope that the chief didn't know about his fear of water. If I swim across the lake, will you be able to catch me then?

Dallion slowed down slightly, then turned around and took a few more shots. The bolts were easily evaded, but it was a relief to know that the old man wasn't particularly fast. If anything, he was only pretty much at the level Dallion had been when joining the hunting party. That was interesting. For someone who ridiculed perception and mind as useless skills, the chief certainly hadn't invested a lot in body.

By rough estimations, the lake was about fifteen minutes away—too far to run in one go. The better solution was to

A wall of green appeared around Dallion. Faced with this, he instinctively jumped back, protecting his upper torso with the buckler while also shooting a bolt. The green disappeared just as the village chief appeared in the air, less than a few feet away. The sneaky old man had just taken advantage of the previous two bolts to make use of the guard skill bonus jump. He had also added something new.

The sword clashed against Dallion's buckler, shoving him to the ground. A series of other strikes followed. This time it was Dallion's turn to evade. It was pure luck that he was able to complete a full sequence, allowing him to jump away to safety.

Not bad. The chief smiled. A pity your grandfather couldn't see you now. Or maybe it's better this way. He would have been so disappointed with how things turned out.

You're one to talk. Dallion was breathing heavily. Even with a body level of five, fatigue had started to creep in. Seems to me like you're projecting.

You know nothing! You're just like all the rest once they awaken! You get a bit of power and think everything is possible. I'm here to show you that it isn't!

The village chief removed the buckler from his arm. The shield burst into dust and disappeared. An archway appeared behind him. There was no mystery about what had happened—the chief linked to his own room. The unusual part came later as a new buckler appeared, this one with a sharp serrated edge. That wasn't good. Dallion's own buckler had done considerable damage when used in battle. An improved version was likely to finish him in three hits or less.

Either way was an option, either seemed futile. Still, it was better than nothing. Before a second had passed, Dallion raised his dartbow and sent out a bolt.

CRITICAL SHOT

Weak spot found!

Dealt damage was increased by 150%

Dallion blinked. The village chief had raised his shield to protect his shoulder, while the bolt had hit his foot. Apparently, he was vulnerable, after all.

Chapter 68: The Chief's Awakening Room

Surprise appeared both on Dallion's and the chief's face. Neither expected the attack to work. If anything, the village chief was surprised more. Freezing up, he glanced down at his foot, refusing to believe that he'd been wounded. The bolt was there, sticking from his foot, even if there was no blood.

The confusion lasted for several seconds. During that time, Dallion took his chance to act. Up to now his plan had been to reach the lake and make use of the well guardian. If this realm was a representation of the village, the lake was supposed to be the well, and if that were true, the water golem could potentially help him. The elder's action presented a new opportunity. In his anger he had linked his awakening room to that of the realm so as to get a better weapon. Doing so, though, had given Dallion the option to enter it.

Without hesitation, Dallion rushed towards the archway. The village chief didn't even try to stop him, still mesmerized by his wound. Deciding not to put all his eggs in one basket, Dallion sent out another shot as he leaped into the opening. The bolt split the air, aimed at the chief's shoulder. Before reaching his target, though, the old man twisted his body to the side. Dallion shot two more bolts. Before he could see the results, the surrounding realm changed.

With a loud thump, Dallion landed on a hard stone floor.

Damn it! he whispered. He had been so close. If the chief hadn't snapped out of it, the battle could already have been won. On the other hand, he was fortunate to have landed a shot at all.

Based on his experience in the awakening shrine, the bolt should have reduced the chief's health by half. Considering the weak spot bonus, the old man likely had twenty-five percent left. Another hit, or even a smack with the buckler, and Dallion could well be the victor.

Where are you? he looked around. There was no sign of the chief. Following the rules of this place, only enemies appeared at the arena. The realm owner was likely to be waiting in the starting room. That gave him a home advantage, but at least Dallion could rest assured that there would be no golem to face.

The arena itself was much more elaborate than Dallion's. While the floor was completely of stone, the walls had a number of decorations on them: sets of decorative armor, paintings depicting fight scenes, even a few portraits of what looked like the village chief in his youth. The general facial

features were clearly identifiable, although there was no doubt that the years hadn't treated the man well. Come to think of it, the portrait looked far closer to the echo Dallion had defeated.

Nice crib. Dallion went to one of the armor sets.

A lot of modern artists would have gone crazy about it back on Earth. The armor was made entirely of pressed paper, like a delicate papier mch. The set itself depicted a cross between Norse and Greek design, Roman Viking if Dallion was pressed to come up with a name. Interestingly enough, the only weapons were those in the paintings.

Talk about self-centered

Since the entrance from the village realm had vanished, Dallion made his way to the only door in the hall. It was as large and ornate as everything else here. Dallion expected it to be barred from the other side. However, after a quick try, it turned out not to be. That was somewhat careless on the chiefs part, or maybe the setup of a trap?

The corridor leading on from the arena was very different from Dallions. It was wide, well lit and covered with a long, if somewhat crude, carpet. A few hundred steps further, doors on the walls became visible. All of them were set in pairs facing each other, and all seemed to be chained shut. Dallion tried cracking one open just to peek inside, but the large metal chains were too tight. The most he was able to do was to move a door half an inch before giving up.

After three sets of doors, finally a pair of normal ones appeared. Left or right? That was the question. Dallion had spent hundreds of hours pondering that question when playing video games. Experience had taught him that when in doubt, turn right, which was exactly what he did.

The room he entered turned out to be the chiefs awakening room. It was considerably larger than Dallions with several sections covered with weapons and armor. Just looking at it suggested that the chief had to be at a level nine at least.

Dallion swallowed. He hadn't expected such a vast difference. Based on the conversations he'd had with Gloria and Veil, the chief wasn't supposed to be more than a level five. Had he been hiding his strength all this time?

Slowly, Dallion moved to the attack section of the room. Twelve weapons were framed on the wall, including a dartbow similar to the one Dallion had. In addition, there were five swords of various shapes and sizes, two sets of daggers placed one over the other in an x-cross manner, three clubs, and a morning star flail. It would almost have been impressive, if all but two swords weren't chained to the wall.

You're not supposed to touch those, a deep metallic voice said from behind.

Chapter 69: Metal Thorns

Dallion briskly turned around, shooting a bolt at the source of the voice. The bolt bounced off a massive iron breastplate and flew on to a different part of the room, where it pierced the wall like a pin.

The person wasn't like anything Dallion had expected. For one thing, he wasn't even certain one could call him a person. Rather, a full set of armor was standing there, looking at Dallion with its hollow helmet.

Those are not to be used, a hollow voice came from the inside of the armor. You cannot put an end to the punishment.

Punishment? Dallion paused.

The entity before him was an echo, he could tell that much there was no rectangle above it but not an echo he had seen before. It didn't resemble a person, instead it was just air and steel. The thought of firing a bolt inside through the hollow opening beneath the helmet came to mind, though Dallion decided against it. This was one case in which he didn't want to recklessly charge forward.

You're not the chief, Dallion lowered his weapon.

You aren't either. Amusing that little Aspion would allow someone in his awakened room to help him. You don't look like you have the skill to do so.

You're not? The suit of armor tilted its helmet. Are you a child of his? Or a rival?

Nope, and nope. Apparently, whoever created the guardian wasn't particularly good at hereditary traits. Someone who's about to kick his ass. Not the best phrase to drop, but suitable given everything else.

An enemy. The voice sounded amused, although it was difficult to tell since the armor completely lacked a face. In that case, you're welcome. I'm not allowed to help you against him, but I'll make sure he doesn't go beyond the imposed limitations.

Okay. What are his imposed limitations?

Awakening level restriction, skills use restriction, skills focus restriction, ability focus restriction, realm limitation, the suit of armor enumerated. That's all I can tell you. You're welcome to look around, just don't touch anything that's been restricted. The suit of armor left the room.

Definitely an unexpected turn of events. To think that the person who had subdued an entire village with his echoes would in turn be limited by an even more powerful one. Yet, who had created it? As far as Dallion knew, suits of armor couldn't be awakened. It had to be someone else.

Making sure that the echo wasn't around, Dallion reached for one of the weapons on the village chief's wall. Metal thorns emerged from the chains, piercing his hand.

LIGHT WOUND

Health Reduced by 10%

Ouch! Dallion quickly pulled his hand back. The echo wasn't kidding. Ten percent just for touching a weapon he wasn't supposed to? That was definitely one way to ensure that the limitation held. Good thing that the chains on the doors outside weren't as harsh.

Unpleasant, but that didn't excuse the chief. As the saying went, there always was a bigger asshole to deal with. Aspion's arrogance had made him meddle with the wrong person, and this was the result.

Although the awakening level restriction sounded very much like what Havoc had gone through. The large man had mentioned that he used to be a higher level, but was reduced to a level three.

Old man? Dallion shouted. There was no response.

That was odd. Where could he be? Dallion looked at the doorway. One unchained door remained in the corridor. Taking a deep breath, he headed towards it.

Carefully, Dallion took hold of the doors handle, then opened it with one swift action. The moment he did, a green shield marker emerged in front of his face.

Damn! Dallion raised his buckler right in the nick of time. A loud cling followed as another buckler pushed him five steps back.

SHOCK ATTACK

Movement limited by 10% for two minutes

Attacks effectiveness reduced by 50% for two minutes

You pest! Aspion shouted. I wont let you ruin everything!

MINOR WOUND

Health Reduced by 5%

MINOR WOUND

Health Reduced by 5%

The attacks were remarkably fierce, even in the tight space of the corridor. The effects of the shock attack had made Dallions actions sluggish. Despite the guard markers and his best efforts, defending himself was becoming more and more difficult. The only option was to move further and further back into the chiefs awakening room.

You dare enter my awakening room? Apsion shouted while pressing on with his attacks. You shouldnt have seen this! Id only have sealed your power, but now Ill he suddenly froze.

Yes? The armor appeared out of nowhere. What would you do now, Aspion?

Closing his eyes for a second, Dallion went through the possible attack options. So many attack options, and so many of them useless. Direct attacks were riskythey would come with guard marker warnings allowing the chief to block or evade them easily. Even a ricochet would be risky or maybe it wouldnt be.

Watch out! the boy shouted, then twisted around and shot at the armors helmet.

The suit of armor didnt try to evade the bolt, remaining perfectly static as the projectile ricochet inside of it. The village chiefs eyes widened with surprise, astonished by what had just happened. However, his astonishment didnt last long, for Dallion didnt stop. While the dartbow remained fixed on the suit of armor, his body continued on, crashing into Aspion and shoving him right into a chained weapon. The old mans entire body writhed in pain the protection had done its thing.

Chapter 70: Final Offer

You lose. Dallion kicked the chiefs sword out of his hand. Instantly the weapon vanished from the floor and reappeared on the attack skill-wall.

This could hardly be called a fair fight Dallion had resorted to many things to gain the upper hand, but finally it had paid off. The terror of Dherma village, the person who had sealed the awakened skills of his mother, the tyrant that had echoed every person in the village had finally lost. At this point, even a sharp kick was enough to reduce his health to zero. If anything, it was a wonder that the old man hadnt lost his abilities altogether.

One more hit and all the limiting echoes would be gone.

No! Aspion raised a shivering hand in front of his face. Dont do it! You dont understand!

Im sure I dont. Tyrants were just like bullies the moment they lost, they started coming up with excuses to defend themselves.

Its not what you think! I just wanted to protect you all. This was the only way!

Yeah, yeah. Dallion aimed at the chiefs torso. A hit anywhere would do the trick. Im sure that the echoes were for their protection as well?

That was the only way to make sure that no one had anything to do with the cities. Youve never been there, you have no idea how dangerous those places are! The chief moved up slightly, only to get reminded by the dartbow that Dallion wasnt inclined to listen. Just because youve defeated me doesnt mean youre a match for the awakened in the cities! Your grandfather was like you. He thought that being gifted gave him an advantage. Instead, it made him a target.

Aspion Luor has admitted defeat.

Do you accept his surrender?

Apparently, people could surrender as well as long as they were in their own awakened rooms. Dallion considered learning how to do so as well at some point. It seemed like a useful ability to have.

What happened to my grandfather? Dallion asked. There was no way he would accept a surrender without getting some answers. This way he could be certain that the chief would keep his promise, and depending on what he said, Dallion was free to refuse.

Dreams, arrogance, and aspiration, thats what happened, Aspion said bitterly. When he awakened, it was considered the greatest day in the village. He had tried so many times before that, all of them unsuccessful. His parents had all but given up, but the idiot was stubborn. No one believed he could make it, then when all of a sudden it happened, he said that he had been offered three skills.

That sounded about right. Dallion remembered his grandfather telling him he had three skills to choose from. The elder also implied that he had gotten to learn them as well.

Attack, Guard, and Forging, the chief continued. I was so envious at the time. Not only had he beaten me by one, but he had acquired forging skills, while I only had acrobatics. It was the difference between day and night. No wonder everyone flocked to him.

Thats why you hated him? Dallion interrupted. He had seen too many animes to know where this was going. You despised the fact that the village chief preferred him to you, so you

Of course, the chief preferred him! The chief was his father!

Dallion blinked. That was unexpected. Trying to think back to his earliest memories of this world, he couldnt recall that being mentioned. As far as everyone was concerned, the Luor family had been in control of the village for generations. Although if both Aspion and Dallions grandfather had been in their teens when the change happened, no one of the younger generation would know. As for the people who had been alive at the time, the echoes had probably made sure that they forgot the truth of things.

And I didnt betray him. I was his friend. A note of sadness crept in. The fact that both of us had become awakened only made us closer. And that is when he shared his dream. The chief paused for a while, then moved a bit, sitting comfortably on the floor. The awakening had made the village too small for him. In a matter of weeks, the things that had seemed fun before tired him. Wed spend the days improving what we could throughout the village. We even made a competition of it. When that became old, we snuck out in the old temple to level up in the awakening shrine.

Dallions throat went dry. So far, the story sounded somewhat familiar. He and Gloria had pretty much done the same. She had been the one reluctant to leave the village, while Dallion had kept inquiring about the cities. If circumstances had been different if Dallion hadnt been in the chiefs crosshairs, and the limiting echoes didnt existhe could have even convinced her to join him on the outside.

His father forbade it, but that didnt stop Kraisten. I used my awakening skills to break into the mansion and find a way out without anyone noticing. Then, one day he asked the question: what do you think the cities are like?

And what did you say?

What could I say? The chief let out a dry laugh. I knew nothing about the cities. All I knew was that I'd work in the village for the rest of my life. However, I wasn't the only one who was there when he asked. My sister was as well.

Dallion's pulse hastened. Now he definitely knew where this was going