

Leveling up 71

Chapter 71: Aspion's Story

Dherma Village, 40 years ago

Have you ever wondered what its like? Kraisten asked from the top of the village bell tower. The place had been declared out of bounds ever since it had nearly crumbled in a storm three years ago. Unknown to most, Kraisten had used his awakening power to mend it months ago. Now it was only the outside that looked decrepit, on the inside the structure was as strong as granite.

The cities? Aspion shrugged. Probably boring. What could they have there that we dont? He crossed his arms. Besides, its not like we can get there.

Uncle Ferion went to join the counts guard last harvest, Kierra said. She was the only one of the group who wasnt an awakened, though tagged along either way.

Idiot, Aspion smirked. He was recruited. Big difference. Recruits dont go there because they want to. And its not like he liked the place or anything.

That much was a lie. While their uncle had been recruited, he had sent several letters back to the village, including a pouch of copper coins and high-grade lumber. The mere fact that he had enough to hire a travelling merchant to travel all the way to Dherma showed that being a guard paid well.

Im thinking of going there. This wasnt the first time Kraisten had said something of the sort. In the last several months, the only conversations the three had been having were about awakening, doing on trips outside the village, as well as the cities. This time, though, there was something different in his voice anyone could tell that his mind had been made up.

Right, Aspion whispered.

He wasnt like his friend. The son of the village scribe, it fell on him to take over from his father. Writing was considered a rare gift, almost as rare as awakening, so his fate was set since birth. Neither awakening, nor having a sister that was a better scribe than him was able to change the will of his father; in that aspect, the man was as unshakable as Kraistens father had been.

If I find a way. Will you two come with me? Kraisten asked.

Sure, Kierra said almost instantly. Aspion, however, hesitated.

They had all heard stories about the cities. Going there meant a new beginning all ties with the village would be severed. As an awakened they would be looked after, with luck they might even reach a moderately high position. As an awakened forger, Kraisten would be snatched up by an artisans guild on the spot. Thanks to his two skills, Aspion could potentially find work as a guard. Kierra, though, had nothing. If she didnt awaken, she would have to be left behind.

Aspion? Kraisten nudged. Its not like you to be humble.

And its not like you to be reckless. The blonde snapped. At least, it didnt use to be. Youve changed a lot since your awakening.

I suppose so. Kraisten smiled. You know how it is. Once you unlock the room theres no turning back.

No turning back

Aspions awakening had been drastically different. For him, he had gone to the village awakening spotas he had been doing every year on his birthdaythen suddenly felt the power of the Seven Moons bloom inside of him. There was nothing spectacular about it. He had remained the same person he had always been, only this time his parents were much prouder of him and also all sorts of relatives came asking favors.

In Kraistens case, the change had been dramatic. Always quiet in the past, he had suddenly become wild and reckless. In the first week alone, he had broken more rules than Aspion could think of. It had been funthe tricks theyd played, the dares theyd gone through with, the secret trips to the awakening shrine. Lately, though, Kraistens obsession was becoming dangerous.

Why do you want to go to the city so much? Its not like its bad here. The way things are going, your father will step down in a few years. That will make you the village chief.

Kierra laughed. Even with Kraistens awakening, it was difficult to visualize him as chief. It was an unimaginable thought, yet Aspion knew first-hand what the chiefs plans were. He had used his increased perception to listen in on a conversation between the chief and his father. Apparently, the old man had been bitten by Crippled-spawn and was already starting to show signs of the illness. In a few years he would barely be able to walk without help, after another five he wouldnt be able to get out of bed.

Its not a few years, Kraisten whispered. My father told me hell make the announcement on my birthday.

Aspion and Kierra stared. That was far too soon.

So, what are you going to do? Aspion asked the question. Run for it?

No. Theres another way. The question is will you join me.

Of course he will, Kierra said before Aspion could reply. Youre friends after all.

Sis Aspion wanted to tell her that she wasnt included in the invitation, but couldnt. He wasnt certain if there was anything going between her and Kraistenthe two hadnt been particularly close in the past, but lately he had started seeing things. Maybe it was all in his imagination, or maybe it wasnt. dont speak instead of me. I can give my own answer.

Well?

Of course we will. Aspion sighed. I didnt want to be a scribe, anyway.

Good. In that case, level up as much as you can. Ill need you at full strength by the end of the week. After that well walk out of the village. Kraisten smiled. All of us.

With that, the conversation ended. With a nod and a wave, Kraisten climbed down the tower, starting his way back to the village chiefs mansion. Kierra followed shortly after.

You coming? Kierra looked back as she started climbing down the belltower.

Go ahead, I need to think about something.

Okay. See you home.

Aspion closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, the bracelet on his left arm had changed from bronze to copper. Anywhere this would have been seen as a great feat. However, he still couldn't catch up to Kraisten.

Chapter 72: Aspion's Story - Dherma Village

It didn't take long for the plan to be revealed. The very next day the village chief made an announcement, or rather it was more of a challenge: should his son manage to improve the state of the village, he would be allowed to leave and head for the cities in the counts domain whenever he wanted.

The idea had surprised nearly everyone, though not Aspion. He had been the one who had told Kraisten of the significance of improving a living area. With settlements being rare, especially on the frontier, every advancement was regarded as a service to the local noble, and required him to offer a boon as repayment. If Kraisten were to improve the village awakened area, the count had no choice but to invite him to the city and offer a reward.

Without a doubt, it was a good plan, though Aspion didn't think that his friends would be as reckless to try it.

By noon the entire town had gathered in front of the chiefs mansion, waiting to witness the miracle. Kierra was also there.

Wow, didn't expect so many people to gather, Kraisten said from the roof of the building.

What did you expect? Aspion laughed. A level three settlement is practically a town.

I thought you told me that towns started at five.

Three is halfway there, Aspion shrugged. It'll be more than most of the dumps in the area. From what my father says, most of them are twos. Improving will put us on the map.

That's the plan.

How are you going to do it, anyway? Leveling up an area isn't a joke. It takes more than just being a level five.

I know. Kraisten smiled. That's why I have you.

Area Awakening

You are in the land of DHERMA VILLAGE

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny

This was the first time that Aspion had been in an area realm. It seemed very much different from he expected. It was much larger than an items awakening room, larger even than the realms in which the awakening shrine trials had taken place. Also, there was a lot more color in it, not only the muddy brown that seemed to compose everything in the real-world village.

So, this is it from the inside? Kraisten crossed his arms. Looks better than the real thing.

A large keep-like structure was beneath them. It was the realm's representation of the chief's mansion. While definitely larger, it was much less well kept. Goblin creatures were visible behind walls and edges, peeking at the duo with fear and aggression in their eyes.

Cracks, Aspion said, drawing his short sword. We don't need to fight them. If we defeat them, we'll just mend your place.

Not fight them? Kraisten drew his own sword. Where's the fun in that?

The single fight improvement they were supposed to have quickly turned into a dozen, then into a hundred. As soon as the pair cut up a pack of goblins, Kraisten would lead them to another keep nearby where they would do the same. It wasn't that fighting the goblins was easy after their initial shock was gone, they had started fighting back with both viciousness and imagination. It was only due to their teamwork and the awakening markers that Aspion and Kraisten had managed to emerge victorious.

Days quickly turned to weeks. Aspion would use his knowledge to find something that could pass as edible in the realm, while Kraisten used his forging skills to use the iron at hand to make superior weapons. In a way it was almost as if they had already left the village and gone on an adventure, with one giant difference: in the awakened state, health never restored back. The wounds they would receive slowly piled up, making them weaker and weaker. By the time they had mended three quarters of the village buildings, Aspion's health had been reduced to sixty percent. As for Kraisten, he had fallen to less than fifty.

I think it's time to stop, Aspion said one evening as they sat round the campfire. We can't mend the entire village. Three quarters isn't all bad.

It's not all of it, Kraisten replied lying on the ground, eyes closed. We'll finish the rest tomorrow.

You've been saying that for days. It doesn't make it less false. Aspion grumbled. The goblins are getting smarter. If we keep wasting our health on them, we won't have enough to challenge the guardian.

And you happen to know where the guardian is?

Yes, Aspion lied. Well, no, but that's not the point. We have to focus on finding him and keeping our health high until we do. What's the point in reaching him at twenty percent health?

We'll be fine. You worry too much. We've got better weapons, good armor, plus the element of surprise. We'll mop up the rest of the goblins, then find the guardian.

To Aspion's surprise, everything happened just as Kraisten said it would. The next few days were spent cleaning out the remaining keeps something they had done with relative ease while only receiving one additional minor wound. Then, on the fourth day, once the last goblin had been reduced to smoke, the village guardian had emerged.

Aspion's prediction had turned out to be correct the guardian was an earth golem, though neither he nor Kraisten had expected to face anything this huge. The monster towered thirty feet above them, holding a club of petrified wood as big as the bell tower they'd hang out at in the real world. For once, even Kraisten had to admit his friend had been right saving up more health would have been the wiser move. Then again wiser didn't automatically mean better.

The fight had lasted over an hour. Combining their skills and attacks, the pair slowly chipped away at the golems force. Sometimes Kraisten would blind it, others Aspion would use his acrobatic attacks to distract the monster enough so that his friends would have an opening. Percent by percent they would toil on, until the final Kraisten made the final blow a five percent critical that crushed the guardian to pieces, but also reconstructed him.

The next thing they knew, the two were back on top of the village chefs mansion, only now it had grown larger, as had all the other buildings in the village.

Chapter 73: Aspion's Story - Drafted

News of the leveling of Dherma spread throughout the entire county. Within days an envoy of Count Harlow came to the village to mark the event. A celebration never before seen in the village was held, bestowing the title of vice-knight on the village chief. According to the new status, the village was allowed to become an official trading post where caravans could stop.

The people responsible for the area improvement were declared heroes, as well as given ten coins of silver, a travel emblem, and permission to enter any of the counts cities. The reward was enough to make any person happy, but Kraisten wasnt content. Despite Aspions best efforts, the only thing his friend wanted was to leave the village.

Why are you being so stubborn? Kierra asked. Its not like its the end of the world. Kraisten only wants to go to the city for a few weeks. After that hell be back.

You dont know what youre talking about, Aspion grumbled. Its not like Im stopping him.

Thats a lot of crap and you know it. His sister crossed her arms. He wont go without you. And I know you well enough to see that you want to go as well, but are refusing just because were asking you.

That wasnt true at all. The only reason Aspion didnt want to go was because he knew that if they went, Kierra would come along. Two emblems and three people. Walking through the world would be dangerous, even if Kierra had awakened. Besides that, wasnt the only reason. The people from the cities scared Aspion. He had only seen them a few times only three outsiders had ever visited Dherma, each of them with a terrifying air around them.

Ill think about it.

When you say that you really mean no.

I dont want to spend my life there, okay?! Aspion snapped. If Kraisten wants to spend the rest of his life there, he can do so without my help.

No ones talking about living there! Its just a visit. A few weeks at the most.

You dont know him as well as I do. He doesnt want to go there to visit. He wants to go there to stay.

The argument continued for several more hours. The more Aspion tried to convince his sister to drop the topic, the more insistent she became. If there was a way to use his awakening powers to make her to shut up, he would have done so. In the end, Aspion gave up. The very next morning the three of them left the village.

No one saw them when they left. As much as Kraisten liked to be in the spotlight, he also wanted to be sure no one would try to stop him. Aspion and his sister did the same, taking clothes, food, and a few essentials before sneaking out of their home and joining him.

It was said that only the lucky and those with protection could wonder the world without harm. Beasts, monsters, and dangerous cultists serving the Crippled Star roamed the land between areas. Only the Order of the Seven Moons, and the travelling emblems were able to provide protection. It was decided between Aspion and Kraisten that they would let Kierra have one of the emblems, while they would take turns wearing the other.

The first few days passed slowly. Aspion would jump at every sound, fearing a monster from the wilderness. After a week, the fear had given way to boredom. Everything they could have said between themselves was said, and as much as Kierra wanted to ditch her brother to spend some alone time with Kraisten, all of them knew they couldnt afford the risk.

Eleven days were needed for them to reach the first townNerosal. By any imperial standard it was small, barely worth the mention. To Aspion and his sister, though, it seemed enormous. Just looking at it there had to be thousands of buildings continuing as far as the eye could see, all surrounded by a wall thicker than the village chiefs mansion. For once, Aspion thought that there might be some truth in Kraistens words.

Just as the city was majestic, so were its prices. A silver coin was only enough to last them a week in a second-rate tavern. Even when pulling all their funds together, it was clear that they wouldnt last over a month. In a way Aspion was glad, that means that they might have to leave in a few weeks after all. However, even he had to admit falling under the towns spell.

Everything was so much better than in Dherma. The shops alone had more than any travelling merchant he had seen. The food was better, the clothes didnt feel like sawdust, and everyone seemed free to do anything they wished.

Finding work had turned out surprisingly easy. After learning that Kraisten had forging skills, he was quickly snatched by the towns blacksmith guild. Aspion had to spend a few days asking about, but ultimately he too was hired by a mending shop. The work wasnt the most interesting ten hours of mending per daybut at least it paid well, and he had gotten a proper weapon to do it with. All in all, things were looking well.

You know, Aspion said, sitting at the towns main fountain. This place isnt that bad.

Told you, Kierra whispered to Kraisten.

Shut up, Aspion mock grumbled. Okay, you were right. It was worth it coming here. Not that I ever saw myself as a full-time mender.

Its just temporary. There are better things in store.

Easy for you to say. I heard you were promoted to journeyman. The whole neighborhood was making a big fuss about it. Guess that head of yours isnt only for show.

Shows what they know. Kraisten smirked. They made the offer, but I turned them down. Theres a faster way to get noticed. The man paused for a few moments. Theres talk of a war going on. Count Harlow has joined Count Priscord in supporting the claim of the Archdukes second son. If they are successful, theyll become the most important nobles in the realm.

The war wont bother us. Nerosal is far too insignificant to get involved, thank the Seven.

Yeah Kraisten paused. Thing is, I went to the local barracks and asked to join the Counts army. And they accepted.

Chapter 74: Painful Recollections

It was said that joining the army was the fastest way to a noble title. All it took was to be noticed by the right people, and soon miracles could happen. The catch was that the chances of promotion were directly proportional to the danger involved. Joining the city guard in peacetime was a pretty decent gig. The only things one had to worry about were local riff raff and the occasional hunt. Normally it would take years to advance in rank. Joining in wartime was an entirely different matter.

Under normal conditions, Aspion wouldnt have even considered such a course of action, but the chance of earning a noble rank attracted him like a moth to a flame. What was more, from what Kraisten had found, Count Harlow wanted to be certain of his victory, so all soldiersrecruits includedwould be granted access to a ten-level awakening shrine. The offer seemed too good to be true, and sadly it was. Joining had been the first mistake.

In less than a week, Kraisten and Aspion had improved from an awakened five to an awakened ten, while Kierra had managed to join the ranks of the awakened and risen to a level five. For a brief period of time life seemed good, everything was exactly as Kraisten had said it would until the fighting began.

When the second son of the Archduke announced his claim to his fathers title, Harlow and Priscords troops launched an attack on the non-loyal counts in the region. However, as the soldiers soon found out, their enemies had been expecting them. A war that they had been assured would be over in weeks dragged for months. Seasons changed, as did orders, but the fighting went on.

Each day seemed worse than the last, though not for Kraisten. The man had proved to be a military genius, winning battles that were considered hopeless. Aspion and Kierra were there as well, following behind, but soon it became obvious that they couldnt keep upthe shadow of their friend was too large.

Half a year after the start of the war, a new opportunity emerged: Kraisten had been offered the chance to become a division commander and, along with that, to earn the title of knight. The only condition was that he capture the Warzen stronghold. That had been the second mistake.

Seven attempts had been made to take the stronghold, and none of them successful. Kraisten, however, had a plan.

I wont lie to you, it will be risky, Kraisten explained to his soldiers. Before we start anything well need to go hunting. The weapons we currently have wont do a thing, so well have to go bigger.

Just how big are we talking about, captain? Aspion asked. He knew how low morale was, so he took any chance he got to try and lighten the mood.

As big as it gets. And then some.

Laughter filled the tent. While most of the people were still tense, the joke had created a momentary semblance of calm.

To win this, we must get a chainling.

The laughter suddenly stopped. There wasn't a person alive who didn't know the significance of what had been said. Chainlings were monsters of the Crippled Star. Their only reason to exist was to kill and corrupt anything they came across. Killing one was extremely difficult, catching one was impossible.

Not to worry, that's the easy part, Kraisten continued as if nothing had happened. We must then climb up the cliff side of the stronghold until we reach the base of the walls. There we must release the chainling and make sure it goes inside. Once it's there the man smiled we'll become the heroes of the war.

Seldom were scarier words spoken. Three dozen people stared at Kraisten, wondering whether to believe their ears or not. They had seen him do the impossible, yet this was too much even for him.

I told you, it won't be easy. And I understand if anyone doesn't want to take part in this. However, there's no other way.

How do you think we'll get a chainling, captain? one of the soldiers asked.

I'll take care of that, don't worry. As I said, that's the easy part. You lot, better focus on the rest. The stronghold area will no doubt be watched. You could be pulled into an awakening duel at any point. I expect you to win if we are to succeed. Remember, if one person fails, the whole thing will go crumbling down and we won't get another chance at this. Clear?

Grumbles of acknowledgement filled the tent. The prospect of failing in an awakening fight managed to put the fears of the chainlings at bay. No one knew how exactly Kraisten planned to catch the creature and no one cared. It was bad enough that they were going against the teachings of the Seven. As long as all ended in victory, they were willing to turn a blind eye.

Bit by bit the soldiers left the tent until only Aspion and Kraisten remained.

You handled them quite well, Aspion said. A bit over the top, but it's certain they'll follow your orders. Now, tell me the real plan.

That is the real plan. I'll take a chainling to destroy that place.

Are you serious? Those things can't be controlled. And even if they could, where will we catch one? The last chainling was seen years ago. And even if one was roaming about, it would take weeks to find it. It simply can't be done.

You surround yourself with books, yet have so little imagination. Kraisten smiled. We won't be hunting a chainling. We'll be making one.

A flash of light blinded Dallion for a moment. After he blinked, he was back in Aspion's awakening room.

What the heck? Dallion took a step back, still aiming the dartbow at the village chief. He had no idea what had happened just now. It was as if he had lived through a memory so intense and so real, as if he'd just been there.

Painful recollections, the old man sighed. A gift that came along with the echo. It keeps reminding me what was, the choices made before everything went wrong.

Chapter 75: Sealed Destiny

You were friends with my grandfather? Dallion found that hard to believe. After everything the village had been subjected to at the hands of the chief, it seemed ludicrous.

I was, Aspion spat out the words with disgust. He craved attention and in the end he got it. The Order of the Seven Moons doesn't like people meddling with the Crippled Star, but that's nowhere near as bad as what your grandfather did afterwards! He

A bolt bounced off the floor inches from the chief's leg.

I think you should shut up now. Whatever the past was, whatever reasons the old man had, he had done too much harm. There was no way he would get away scot free, although maybe he didn't deserve to be condemned to the fate he had put upon others.

The surrender rectangle was still there, conveying the offer. All Dallion had to do was to accept and he would have won.

If I accept the surrender, will the echoes disappear? Dallion asked.

Yes. It's the same as if you've won the battle, Aspion replied, still keeping an eye on the dartbow.

I wasn't asking you. There was no way he'd trust anything that man said.

No, the armor echo replied. You would gain control of the village area, but the echoes will remain. You can make your own and send them to fight them.

What if I shoot him?

Aspion's power would have been sealed. All echoes he's created will disappear, and the village of Dherma will lose its area owner.

Seemed straightforward enough.

Wait! Aspion reached out. Don't! I can still help you! There's a lot you don't know! Your grandfather can't tell you, but I can! Become village chief, take my mansion if you wish, just don't seal me.

Did you give my mother that option? Or me when you imprisoned me in the well?

Imprisoned? Aspion's eyes flashed with rage. You call that imprisoned?! You have no idea what the word even means! I was imprisoned in a realm for twenty years for what your grandfather did! No food, no water, nothing but mist, fear, and hunger! I won't allow anyone to go through that, even if I have to create a thousand limiting echoes!

Dallion pulled the trigger. The surrender rectangle evaporated into the air, disappearing in a cloud of glowing blue smoke. Other parts of the room soon followed: small things at first: weapon frames, room corners, the occasional spot on the wall. As the seconds went on, more and more sections turned into smoke. So, this was how an awakening room was sealed? It was not at all what Dallion had imagined.

Sorry, old man, I just can't let you Dallion stopped.

The village chief had frozen motionless on the floor, not even blinking.

Hey, you okay? Despite himself, Dallion moved closer. Part of him was ready for another dirty trick, but none followed. The chief was completely out of it.

That's what happens when one loses the connection to their awakening room, the suit of armor moved closer. It'll all seem like a dream before waking. The next time he tries to go here, it will be all gone. The only thing he'll be able to see is a small empty room.

You are level one, Dallion said. He would be lying if he didn't admit feeling a grain of pity. If there was any truth in the memory, Aspion had been good once. Maybe in his own way he even did what was best to keep the people of Dherma safe? Will he remember what happened?

He'll always remember. That's part of his punishment. I could make the memories less vivid. Or I can increase them. As the one who sealed his power, you've earned the right to choose.

Dallion nodded. The village chief had been right about one thing: there were scarier people out there. Whoever had done this wasn't joking around. For one thing, the echo had been in Aspion's awakening room for decades.

Numb them down. Dallion walked away. As he did, parts of the village chief were turning to smoke as well. He was terrible to everyone around him as an awakened, but maybe as an ordinary person he could find some peace.

I very much doubt it. The armor shrugged. But it's your call. When he goes to sleep, he'll no longer have night terrors.

Thanks. What happens to me now? Do I need to find a way out of here before everything collapses?

If you want. Makes no difference. Once the awakening realm crumbles, you'll be back in the real world.

Sounds a bit anticlimactic.

The suit of armor laughed.

Any chance you'll tell me who you are or what the old man's crime was?

No.

Thought so. Dallion looked at the room. Most of the walls and the entire ceiling had turned into smoke, making the floor feel like a piece of ice in a boiling pot of water. Anyway, thanks for the help. See you around.

You better hope not, the suit of armor whispered before the last solid fragment of the village chief's realm was gone.

ASPION LUOR's destiny has been sealed

Time stopped, then continued again. In a blink of the eye, Dallion was back in the outskirts of his village, flying through the air towards the village chief.

Putting in all the effort he had, Dallion twisted himself in the air, narrowly avoiding a direct collision with the village chief. That had to be the clumsiest approach ever. It was only thanks to Dallions guard skills that he managed to find his footing.

Immediately, he jumped back, expecting the village chief to take advantage of the situation and counterattack. Instead, the old man fell to his knees.

Utter silence filled the air. Not even the wind dared make a noise. The entire population of Dhermahundreds of people, young and oldstared at the scene, unable to believe their eyes. It wasnt only the common folk, it was the elders, the guards, even the members of the Luor family looked around, as if they were seeing the world for the first time.

Dallion smiled in relief. He knew exactly what they were going throughthe sensation of life without a limiting echo.

Chapter 76: The Glory of Luor

Ever since the first week he had been in this world, Dallion had imagined defeating the village chief and freeing Dherma from his tyranny. Of course back, then he couldnt even remember the name of the village, or pretty much anything else of significance. If he hadnt been from Earth, he might not have remembered anything at all. Now that the deed was done, he didnt know how to feel. That was the problem with real lifeit was never straightforward.

Dallion looked at the village chief beside him. Without the echoes and his awakening powers, the aura of authority had vanished, making him look like a weak old man.

So, you really did it? Veil approached. Should have guessed if anyone would manage it would be you.

Guess so. Dallion took a deep breath. While he appeared no different from he had a moment ago, the battle against the village chief had left him exhausted. The last thing he wanted to do now was fight. Given a choice, he wanted to go back home and spend the rest of the day sleeping. Do we have to do it now?

Not feeling like it? There was no smile on Veils face. Theres no fun taking an easy win. However, you won in public. The entire village knows. If I dont defeat you now, the Luor family name will be dragged through the mud.

That was an absurd thing to say. As far as Dallion was concerned, the Luor name had become pretty bad already in the last few generations. Other than Gloria and Veil to an extent he couldnt think of a good thing to say about any of them.

I dont suppose youd accept a surrender? Dallion asked. His only advantage was that Veil didnt know about the dartbow. With that, he had a chance, although that would mean Veil would lose his powers.

Veil shook his head.

Damn you, Aspion! Even in defeat you make a mess of things!

Dallion didnt want to lose against Veil, but he didnt want to win either. If he wasnt this damned tired, maybe hed be able to think of a way to think of something.

Give me a minute to rest a bit? Dallion took a few steps and leaned to the nearby building.

He always could enter the awakening realm of an item he was carrying and sleep there, though that wasn't going to solve much. Sleeping was only good to rest between awakening battles, not immediately after.

You don't have a minute. Veil leaned on the wall as well. This must be settled once and for all.

I was afraid you might say that. Can I, at least

Suddenly a building nearby changed form. Moments ago, it had been a decrepit building about to crumble under its own weight. In the blink of the eye, all the cracks and holes were miraculously fixed. Not only that, the entire structure had become much more solid than before. There was no doubt about it; the building had been improved.

A moment later the same thing happened again.

As everyone can see, the task set up by the village chief has been completed, Gloria said in a loud voice. Two buildings that were in no shape to survive the winter are now ready to become the home of anyone who wants. All thanks to Dallion.

He hadn't expected this in the least. Looking closely, he could see Gloria standing suspiciously close to the improved structure. The girl's breathing had become irregular, although only a person with awakened senses would be able to tell.

That wasn't all. The building Dallion was leaning on had also gone through a major transformation. The boy was just about to ask how that had happened, when he saw Veil's hand on the wall.

Her idea, Veil whispered, stepping away from the wall. I helped.

Yeah Dallion laughed. What if I had lost?

Oh, then we would have ridiculed you, the blond replied without hesitation. Mercilessly. That was my part of the plan. Just a little something to give you a bit of incentive.

And this is just the beginning! Gloria continued. Today marks a new day for Dherma! For years grandpa thought he could protect us from the dangers of the world by keeping us inside and taking the entire burden on himself. As the chainling hunt showed us, there are always dangers lurking about and it should not be up to a single awakened to face them for us.

That definitely wasn't the way Dallion would have described the situation. When Veil had said that things had to be settled once and for all, this is what he meant. Quite sneaky.

After hearing what he had been through with the Archduke's envoy, my grandfather has agreed that everyone should be helping the village out, Gloria continued. And to start, my brother and I will help improve more buildings around here. And we won't be the only ones to do so.

Several members of the Luor family turned pale. Decades of comfort and easy life had made them avoid work like the plague. Even with their awakened powers, all they had done was improve a few simple items by a level at most. Getting accustomed to actual work was going to be painful.

Quite a good show, without a doubt. Dallion had to admire the performance. But it wasn't over yet. The final touch remained. Mustering all his strength, he went to the village elder and helped him up. The old man gave him a confused look, still unsure what had happened. In his mind everything remained a dream, possibly with a little help from the armor echo.

Thank you for your wisdom, old man! Dallion said. For its thanks to you that I now know what's really important. And so does everyone else! Now it's finally time to put Dherma back on the map!

Chapter 77: New Dawn

It was impressive how much things could change after because of one simple action. Not that Dallion would have called defeating the village chief simple. It had taken him a full day of sleep to recover from the battle. Apparently fighting in someone else's awakening room was more exhausting than two all-nighters in a row. Upon waking up, though, Dallion had found himself in an entirely different village. It was as if a mythical entity had come by and cranked up the color saturation of everything to a hundred.

People moved about energetically through the streets, doing chores that had been neglected for years. Crumbling walls were being fixed, doors mended, Dallion even saw his father rearranging the clay tiles on the roof. And all that was done with so much joy and enthusiasm, one would have thought it was a holiday.

Brother Linner rushed from somewhere in typically energetic fashion. He was the only one who appeared the same. Then again, if he had become more cheerful than before, he could well have blinded the sun. Did you hear? We're going back to our old house!

Oh? Dallion smiled.

Yeah! Grandpa said there's plenty of room. Also, Veil improved it, so it's all nice and shiny right now! Just like the pebble you gave me.

Lets go there! Linner grabbed Dallion by the hand and started pulling him towards the village center.

Hey, wait a bit. Dallion played along, finding his brother's actions amusing. Do you want to live there?

You bet! Linner grinned.

What's wrong with our old house?

The child stopped. This was a question that he couldn't answer right away. Dallion could see it written on his face. Linner liked their old home, but he also liked the prospect of living in a new bigger place as well.

Can't we have both? Linner asked, just like someone his age would.

Why not both, eh? Dallion crossed his arms.

Well, it's not like grandpa has anything against. Besides, that house is small, and dad snores a lot

Snores? Dallion laughed. His brother had no idea how right he was. After Dallion had improved his perception, the noise was worse than a sawmill. Tell you what. You get all your things ready and I'll help you carry them to grandpa's house.

Yay!

Just be sure to get mom and dad to agree to it.

Boo! Linner crossed his arms. That's not fair!

That's what big brothers are. Dallion winked. We're very unfair. But who knows? Maybe you'll be able to convince them to let you spend some time there, right?

That wasn't what the child wanted. He glanced at Dallion, then at their father on the roof. The large man was doing a remarkable job of pretending not to hear a thing. Being a parent involved a lot of that. Thinking back, he had always been there to support everyone in the background. He hadn't meddled in any of Dallion's decisions, hadn't given him any advice concerning awakening issues, and yet there was always food on the table, and the house was kept in fairly good condition. What was more, he made Dallion's mother happy.

Fine, Linner mumbled. I'll go talk with mom and dad.

I knew you would. Meanwhile, I'll go have a word with grandpa. I can't let you have the best room, after all.

Brother! Linner pouted. I wouldn't do that. Not until I kill my first beast outside the village!

The status of the elders was another thing that had changed in the last day. In the past, the council had no real power, the village chief only kept them for appearances. Now, he had turned into the figurehead. Officially, nothing had changed; everything continued to be done in Aspiion's name, the village elders only acted as advisors to the Luor family. Whatever the actual agreement was, it seemed to be in everyone's interest.

A short distance before reaching his grandfather's place, Dallion stopped and looked at the sky to the west of the village. That's where the belltower had been. He had only seen it twice: once on the charts in his awakened library, and once in Aspiion's memories of regret.

The sky's not falling down, the familiar voice of his grandfather said. Although it might rain in a week or two. The weather patterns are usually stable here, but you never know.

Yeah. One never knows. Dallion nodded.

I guess congratulations are in order. You're fully awakened now.

Does it show?

Usually not, but I have a nose for those things. The elder moved closer. Defeating Aspion also gave me a hint.

And here I thought that getting rid of the echoes would be the thing that gave me away. Dallion smirked.

Oh, I'm sure you did great. Though you didn't remove all the echoes.

Dallion felt a chill down his spine. Was there something he had overlooked? His grandfather had told him that as long as he defeated the village chief, everything would return to normal, and it had. Proof could be seen all around. In that case, what echoes were remaining?

Don't be so glum. Kraisten slammed Dallion on the shoulder like a bear. You did fine. Not all the problems in the world are your responsibility. All I meant to say is that I won't be of too much help. Aspion wasn't the one who invoked my punishment. There's still a great deal I cannot tell you, but there are a few things that might be of help.

Chapter 78: Two of a Kind

The elder's house was just as improved on the inside as it had been outside. Every item and piece of furniture within view had been carefully mended, including a large carpet Dallion remembered ripping as a child by accident. The thing had been so old that just walking on it had caused a tear. Now it appeared brand new.

You've been busy, Dallion said, impressed.

A bit. Kraisten went to the living room table, another new addition, made entirely out of stone and sat down. Others did most of the work. I can't improve much these days.

Can you still craft? Dallion joined the elder.

So you've heard that?

I saw a few things in the chief's awakening room. A suit of armor told them to me. He paused a moment. He told me you were the reason the way things turned out around here. Is that right?

It is, the elder replied with a sigh. Aspion did a lot of crap, but he's not wrong about this. I made the mistake that set things in motion. All because of a noble.

A noble? Dallion thought that the Order of the Seven had punished them both. Well, all three of them there was the matter of the chief's sister, although by the way everyone referred to her she was likely dead.

But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Tell me, grandson, how's Earth these days?

Earth? The only reason Dallion didn't choke was because there wasn't enough saliva in his mouth. Had the old man just said Earth?

You didn't think you were the only one who suddenly awakened here, did you? Kraisten laughed. I thought you'd have figured it out by now, especially with the hint I dropped last time we had a talk.

Dallion thought back. The last time was after improving the well. It seemed like ages ago. What hint had his grandfather given him?

Genetics. Dallion shook his head. Luck, genetics, or intense training, he recited the phrase. How hadn't he caught on until now? It was so obvious. Of course, there was no way anyone in this realm had heard the term.

The realization felt as if a huge weight had been taken off Dallion's shoulders, a weight he didn't know he had. He was no longer the only Earthling in this realm. Now he knew for certain that his memories weren't a dream. Even better, there was someone with whom he could freely talk to about back home! Or could he? Kraisten had awakened in this world over fifty years ago. Back then Dallion wasn't even more heck, there were probably dozens of countries from that time that no longer existed, not to mention the leaps in technology

Yep, genetics. Kraisten smiled. A nice loophole. The echo limitation only lets me talk about things others already know, but it had difficulty catching certain terms as long as I'm subtle about it. I knew you were from back home from the start, just as I know there are more like us.

There are?

Yeah, though I've only met one other, ages ago. Look for people who were confused after their awakening. It usually takes a few days for the mind to clear up. The Order calls it soul confusion. I tried asking them more about it, but they keep to their own. The only way they'd provide information to an outsider is if you joined them, and that's something I'd advise against.

Because they'll punish me if they learn that I'm not from here?

I can't tell you. The elder frowned. There are many reasons, but that's a conclusion you'd have to come on your own.

That was sadly convenient. At least Dallion knew for certain that there were others like him. And that meant

Is there a way back? he asked.

To Earth? If there is, no one has found it. You really want to go back there? Don't know about you, but I wouldn't. Even after everything that's happened, I prefer it here. And by the look of it, so do you. Kraisten rubbed his hands. You've felt it, right? The power of awakening, the call of adventure, all the possibilities this world offers. Aspion couldn't stomp it out of you with threats and echoes. He tried, but you ended up on top.

What about you? Dallion asked. Will you leave the village? The chief is no longer stopping you.

He's not the one stopping me, but no. The elder shook his head. I've no intention of going. I've grown to like Dherma. Now that Aspion's grandkids have taken over, we might even improve it a level or two. You'll leave, though.

Oh? Why so certain?

Because you wont find your answer here.

Whats the question.

What lies beyond? Kraisten smiled. Thats what makes us different. The question that drives us to reach the top just to take a look. My way didnt work, but maybe yours will. Either way, it will be one heck of a ride getting there.

The question that drives people to reach the top just to take a look Dallion had never considered it this way. All he wanted to do was see what it was like in the city. He had no intention of joining the city guard, despite his experience in the hunting party, nor did he want to become a noble. He just wanted to see what it was like outside the village. Maybe thats how it had started for his grandfather as well? The memory hed seen made it appear that way, but Dallion wasnt his grandfather, even if both of them came from Earth in a manner of speaking.

So, finish everything you have to, say your goodbyes and get out of here. Carry only what you must, sleep in the awakened state as much as you could, be always ready to fight, and never trust anything with a dark star on it.

The last sounded particularly specific, but Dallion nodded nonetheless.

Thanks, Gramps. He stood up. I think Ill learn a few things about this world. And when I get back, well have a proper talk about it.

Chapter 79: Wish of the Well

It was already an incredible coincidence that his grandfather had turned out to be one. Maybe there was something linked to genetics after all?

What do you think? a familiar voice asked nearby, it was Veil. Dallion had to admit the blond had improved quite a bit as well since their last fight. Judging by the way he had suddenly appeared, he might have gotten a second skill as well. I fixed up the place nice, right?

You did? Dallion smirked. I thought Gloria was doing most of the work.

Cant wait to get rid of me? Should I start calling you chief now?

Give it a few years. Also, dont think youll be ahead for long. Sis told me of your little secret, so dont count on me staying level four for long. He laughed. Seriously, though. What are you doing here?

I came to have a talk with the well, Dallion replied. A while back, he had made a promise to the guardian. And now it was time to deliver.

Seriously? Veil arched a brow.

Dallion made his way to the center of the square and placed his hand on the well.

Seriously, he said.

Area Awakening

The surrounding landscape changed, taking him to the realm of the well. In part it could have been his imagination, but the place seemed much more cheerful now, and not only because it was mended to a hundred percent. A golden sun shined upon the mountains, making the streams and rivers glisten as its rays bounced off.

You are in the land of WELL

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny.

Hey, guardian! Dallion shouted. Ive returned as I promised. Are you ready to duke it out?

Silence. The guardian wasnt budging from his arena. It would have been too easy if he had. Then again, Dallion was not one to complain. If the battle had taken place last time, there was a large chance he would have been defeated. Instead, the guardian had made him an offertake the victory, but promise to return and level up the well again.

That had been the first time that Dallion had actually heard a guardian speak. He had accepted, of coursehe would have been a fool not to. Even so, there was a sense of dissatisfaction about it. The victory was a hollow victory, offered only because of their common hatred of the village chief; that was one thing to notenever treat an object or area poorly, for you never know when its guardian might have enough of its owner.

Well, I guess its back to climbing.

The rest of the day was spent going up the mountain. The increase in body stat made the experience much easier, although Dallion still wasnt able to reach the peak of the central mountain by nightfall. This time, he could rest calmly knowing that there was nothing to attack him, and even if there was, the dartbow granted him a huge advantage. At the crack of dawn, the climbing continued.

In a matter of hours, Dallion achieved what had taken him nearly a day before. It wasnt even mid-morning by the time he reached the top. What was more, he didnt feel remotely tired, if slightly hungry.

Hey, guardian, Dallion said. The air felt remarkably sweet. Im here. Im ready.

On cue, a hole emerged in the center of the stone arena. Moments later, the stone golem appeared as well.

WELL GUARDIAN

Species: Golem

Class: Stone

Statistics:

- 100% Health

- 25 Stone Armor

Skills

- Water Jet

- Rock Throw

- Water Blade

Weak Spots: Tendons

Dallion still had no idea how the classification was made, since the creature was as much water as stone. If he were to be pedantic, it should have been Stone and water guardian.

You returned, the guardian said in its echoing voice. For a moment Dallion could swear he could see gratitude and confusion on its face.

Others claimed the same, and they never came.

That sounded ominous. Was it possible that the guardian was talking about Dallions father? More likely it was referring to Aspion, or someone from his family.

The village chief isnt an awakened anymore. Those that are will be sure not to neglect you.

I know. I saw you in the greater realm. I would have helped when I heard your call, but you were too far away.

It happens. At least that meant that Dallions plan had been good. So, do we start? I know Ive been itching to. Just a word of warning. Dallion took out his dartbow. I have a ranged weapon now.

In response, the guardian shot a stream of water several feet from the boy. Apparently Dallion wasnt the only one with an advantage.

Maybe this was a good point to try to make an echo? Dallion hadnt had any practice in that area. In truth, he only had a vague notion how it was done. The awakening shrine seemed to have planted the concept in his brain, but had done little in the terms of actual demonstrations. Two Dallions would definitely be able to fight much better than one

COMBAT INITIATED!

Chapter 80: Critical Wounds

A week ago, Dallion would have charged directly at the guardian. Both of them had ranged attacks now, also the boy had matured quite a bit since their last encounter. There was more in fighting than the actual battle. As he looked at the golem, Dallion saw many of his optionshe could shoot a bolt directly at him, he could wait for the guardian to make the first attack, or he could start walking

calmly forward. For a split second, images of each action appeared in Dallions mind, showing him the results. In two of the cases, the resulting counterattack dealt Dallion a minor injury.

For several steps nothing happened, then green footprints appeared along with a shield marker in the air. Dallion didnt think, following the guard skills suggestion without even looking. No sooner had he done so than a stream of water splashed into his buckler.

The force of the attack was significant. Before, it would have even knocked Dallion easily to the ground. Now, it only pushed him a step back. Leveling up his body stat was useful after all.

My turn, Dallion said. Following the guard markers through to complete a full set, Dallion then aimed at the watery area between the guardians arm and torso.

A weak spot marker appeared. Once the aim was spot on, Dallion squeezed the trigger.

In his past experience, slashing and piercing attacks had little effect on waterthe third guardian in the awakening shrine had shown him that much. Dallion expected hed only achieve a minor wound taking five percent off the golems health, if that. Instead, the water exploded as if someone had triggered a depth charge.

CRITICAL WOUND!

Dealt Damage increased by 200%!

Lacking its connection, the large boulder that composed the golems arm dropped off, slamming to the ground.

ARM SEVERED

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

Now Dallion understood why the dartbows were considered so important. If there was such a thing as a military grade weapon in this world, this was one of them. The bolts had the same effects on water as they did on a solid surface, or even more by the looks of it.

The golem looked at its arm, then back at Dallion. The crack of a smile appeared on its large head.

Want to give up? Dallion smiled. Or do we call it a draw?

Instead of an answer, water flowed towards the golems missing limb. Within moments a new arm was formed. While it lacked any rocks, in shape it very much resembled the one that the guardian had lost.

That didnt seem particularly fair. When the rectangle had made its announcement, Dallion had expected it to mean that the golem would continue the fight with one arm less. Apparently, all it meant was that the golem couldnt use that specific arm, but there was nothing preventing it from regrowing a new one.

As Dallion aimed at another of the creatures weak points, the golem twisted its body, hurling the fist of its right arm towards him like a giant flail. The green cone marking the impact zone was enormouslarger than Dallion could evade. To make matters worse, there were a half a dozen shield marker positions, each facing a different direction.

Dallion had seen that before with the training guardian, though never with a normal one. Was that the difference between an area guardian and an item one? If so, it was a huge stroke of luck he hadn't tried to fight the village guardian. A being controlling an area that large, even if it not commanded by Aspion, would definitely have proved too much.

Attack is the best defense! Dallion shouted as he launched another bolt at a weak spot in the guardians left leg. His gamble was that a single guardian hit wouldn't be enough to exhaust his entire health.

Two of the shield markers disappeared. Apparently, the closer the golems fist got, the less attack paths it presented. Dallion could wait slightly more in the hopes that only one option would be left, or he could gamble and choose one now. The difference was that there was no guarantee he had the reaction speed necessary to react later.

CRITICAL WOUND!

Dealt Damage increased by 200%!

LEG SEVERED

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

MODERATE WOUND!

Health has been decreased by 25%

Dallions back felt like a pin hit by a bowling ball. The force of the blow brought him to his knees. Simultaneously, the golems leg dropped off as well, only to be replaced by a second one.

Crap, Dallion said, gasping for breath. The pain had almost entirely disappeared, although he still felt short of breath. You're no pushover.

Area guardians really were on an entirely different level. And to think that both Veil and Gloria had managed to defeat a few. Granted, they had faced level one guardians, but it was still damned impressive.

There's no way I'm falling behind. Dallion stood up. Enough warmup. Time for the real deal!

The distance between Dallion and the guardian was a few hundred feet. Dallion could continue trading long ranged attacks and rely that his enemy would be out of damage before he was. So far, the odds were in his favor. Two critical attacks had reduced the golems health to sixty percent. Three more hits and he would be victorious. Of course, the same could be said for the guardian.

This battle has already cost you an arm and a leg.

Dallion assessed his options. Water jet attacks wouldn't be an issue, but while the golem had a functional arm, the rock-hurling option would be a pain. Despite the obvious, the solution was to decrease the distance.

Darude. Dallion dashed forward, taking aim at the guardians other leg.