

Leveling up 91

Chapter 91: Harpsisword

A world in which space wasn't an issue that's what this place was for the awakened. Back on Earth Dallion took for granted he had all the knowledge of humanity. All that seemed like a child's toy here. The library that Captain Adzorg had given him was in fact a very real library, full with more tomes and scrolls than Dallion could count. Knowledge that he couldn't imagine was held in the awakening realm of a simple ring. Of course, there was a catch. The librarian echo that oversaw the library, could only grant access to any of pieces of knowledge, and for the moment it had only allowed Dallion to read a single scroll.

Miser, Dallion grumbled. One scroll was more than plenty for him right now, but knowing that there was so much more denied from him, soured the experience.

Adding insult to injury, the scroll he was allowed to read was dry and boring as a history lecture. If Dallion was expecting he'd learn anything more about his awakened powers in order to fill the gaps in his training he was mistaken. Instead, he now knew the names of the seven moons, which attributes they were linked to, the order by which they appeared in the sky, and the time they remained visible according to month.

After an hour spent rereading the same paragraph, Dallion decided he needed a break.

Going so early? Adzorg's echo which Dallion had gotten to call Nil asked.

Afraid so, Nil. There's a lot of things I need to do.

Such as? Nil crossed his arms.

I have to mend the furniture in the tavern after last night. Also, the counter. A few of the patrons had become decently drunk and overly enthusiastic, smashing mugs on the counter at the early hours of the day. Hannah had quickly kicked them out, though not before they had made several deep scars on the side of the counter. Oh, and I have to go buy some proper clothes. Hannah's orders.

The echo gave Dallion a look reserved for school delinquents, then just shrugged. A second later, Dallion was back in his comfortable bed. The sun was already rising, leaking rays of light through the shutters of the room.

Given how strict the innkeeper was, the boy allowed himself a few more minutes of leisure, before washing up and getting dressed.

The first thing he did in the morning was to rush to the toilet. The second to wash his hands and return to the main room. Despite last night's ruckus, the damages were less than he expected. Taking a deep breath, Dallion went on to do his job. A minute later, everything that could be mended was as good as new. Several glasses and a few of the chairs would have to be replaced, though. There was only so much that awakened powers could do.

You're diligent, Hanna said, startling Dallion into a hop.

Having relied on his superior hearing, he had gotten out of the habit of looking around for people.

Easy there, it's just me with your breakfast, the woman said, more amused than anything. Leftovers from last night, with the cook's compliments.

Itll be fine. Dallion forced a smile, his heart racing in his chest. Youll need to replace a few chairs. He added after a while.

Much less now that youre here. Hannah snorted. Eat your food.

The eating went in silence. Both of them sat less than a step apart on both sides of the counter, and neither had anything to say. Only when Dallion had gulped down the last bite, did the woman slam a coin pouch in front of him.

Here. Thats for some decent clothes, and what other small necessities you need.

Thanks. Dallion picked up the pouch. It was pleasantly heavy. Ill be sure to pay you back.

Idiot. The woman smiled. It was her first unadulterated smile Dallion had seen on her face. Those are your earnings. Mending doesnt come free. Id never let people carve up my mugs and tables on a normal night. Why should this be different?

You mean everyone yesterday paid to see me mend things?

Thats the short of it. There might be plenty of you in the city, but you still are a big deal. Not all work at inns, most only do it because they have no choice and it shows.

So, a little showmanship went a long way.

Dont expect this every night! Now, that they know your tricks, theyll probably return to behaving properly. My advice, make use of this as fast as you can. Dress up, train up, create a good impression at your guild, then you can start saving for a place of your own.

Dallion wasnt certain whether she was encouraging him, or suggesting she wanted him out. Either way, he nodded.

Ill be sure to put these to good use. He tied the pouch to his belt. It felt horribly insecure, but there wasnt much he could do. Wheres Jiroh?

Out. Hannah narrowed her eyes. Why?

I was hoping shed show me about the city. You know, take me to some good places to buy clothes from, that sort of thing.

Shell be away for a few days. There was a trace of doubt in the innkeepers voice. And the faster you start handling things on your own, the better. Dont rely that well carry you forever.

The air outside was incredibly sweet. After some wandering about aimlessly, Dallion found that the yellow flower bushes that hed seen about the city, were the source of the sweet fragrance. To an awakened it was like walking through the perfume aisle of a mall. Whoever was in charge of city planning had done a pretty good job. Soon it became apparent that there were other conveniences for awakenedsmall subtle things that wouldnt be the everyday person.

Hey, you there! a voice carried from the next block. Dallion looked in the direction to see a plumb middle-aged man wave at him.

Looking at him, there was nothing remarkable about the man. He was almost invisible in the crowd among the other denizens. The leather apron he was wearing suggested that one might be a blacksmith, or at least working with one.

Feeling a mild sense of curiosity, Dallion approached.

Yes? he asked.

New in town? the other whispered.

Sort of. Dallion already regretted approaching. Of all the things he had stumbled on a salesperson of some sort.

Come in here, the man grabbed him by the hand.

Look, I really

Itll be worth it. The man whispered. Judging by his voice, he wasnt lying.

Dallion let himself be dragged down a small alley, and into what seemed to be a weapons shop. A few moments later, Dallion saw it was much more. All the weapons on display were flawless, and several were made from sky silver.

The man hurriedly shoved Dallion inside, then closed and barred the door.

That was really stupid, the man said, letting a sigh of relief. Good thing its morning. If youd been out in the evening, the city guard would be crawling all over the place.

Look, whatever youre selling, I really dont

Your pouch. The man pointed. Next time, tightened it better, or at least put some cloth inside. You could hear the coins rattle throughout half the city.

Dallion blinked.

Youre an awakened? he asked.

Id have thought that was obvious.

Never was one for flashing things. Besides, after a while you stop feeling the itch. Oh, names Taem, by the way.

Dallion

Youre still confused, arent you? Right, let me explain things for you. Nerosal, like any big city, comes with its level of crime. For the most part, were safe. Only a fool would dare do major damage in the Countess second most favorite city. However, theres a plague even this place cant escapepetty things and pickpockets.

Instinct made Dallion grab his pouch.

Good reflexes, but maybe next time do that before you hit the street?

Of course, there would be pickpockets. Just because there wasnt crime in Dherma village didnt mean there wouldnt be any here. Dallion had naively taken it for granted that hed be untouchable. If the thieves were ordinary people, he might be right, but with so many awakened it was inevitable that some of them resorted to crime as well.

Sorry, no one warned me

Dont expect people to warn you about everything. You were lucky this time. Next time, who knows.

Why did you help me?

Why not? If you get mugged, the city guard will start snooping around, and when they do, weapon shops are the first to get closed. Last time some newbie got robbed here, I had to wait half a week before the city captain let me reopen.

Makes sense. So, what weapons do you have?

Dallion forgot all about his clothes. Or rather, they no longer seemed such a priority. He could always get clothes later. Now that he was here, he might as well invest in a bit more firepower, so to speak.

See something you fancy? Taem flashed a confident smile. All of these were made by yours truly. Most are out of your range, but Im sure therell be something you could use. How much coin do you have?

That was a good question. Impressed by the weight of the pouch, Dallion hadnt even opened it. To his relief it turned out that a large part of the coins were silvers. The weapon smith took a passing glance, then went to a section of the wall that held daggers and took a few pairs. Dallion looked at him for a few moments, but his eyes quickly strayed away, attracted by the more massive articles.

The entire broadsword section was something that he had only seen on fantasy art forums. Having one of those would have provided him with quite the advantage when fighting against the awakening shrine guardians. Not as good as the dartbow, though And thinking about the dartbow, there were several massive double crossbows in the shop as well, placed in their own separate shelf. Each was the size of a small desk, with two bows arranged in the form of the letter X. Four bolts were placed in between, all of them four times longer than any Dallion had held.

Whats that for? Dallion pointed. Mountains?

The crossbows? Taem glanced over his shoulder. Castles mostly. They were from before the war. Not much demand lately. Too slow to be used against abominations.

They look just like dartbows.

The weapon smith laughed. If youre oversimplifying it, why not just say they look like a bow? I wouldnt recommend buying one. It takes years learning how to master a crossbow. People are better off buying two modified dartbows. Taem placed five sets of daggers on a small wooden table in the end of the room. Here we go. Good for throwing and close combat. What sort of weapons have you used so far?

A short sword. Dallion said. After all that talk about dartbows he didnt feel the desire to admit he had one.

And? The weapon smith asked, waiting patiently.

And a short sword. Dallion felt his forehead burn up. Truth is, I havent used any weapon so far. Never been in a real fight? Tael asked with understanding.

For one thing, the sword you start with is made of air.

Dallion stared at him blankly.

I see Ill have to explain things a bit, the blacksmith sighed. You know the difference between an awakening fight and a real one, right? In the awakened realm you get all those useful hints and markers, telling you what to do and when to do it. Perfect to learn something, but otherwise useless. If I hit you now, you wont see any warning markers, youll have to rely on your own reflexes and experience. Its the same with weapons and armor. Unless they are material he tapped the blade of a dagger with his finger they dont exist.

Now, heres the tricky part. You cant take weapons you have in an awakened realm. That is, unless they are made out of one of seven special metals.

Sky silver, Dallion quickly said.

Thats one example. Cheap and abundant. Using it, I can forge a shape that will be transferred in the awakened realm, so you can use it in both places.

I see. So, all those weapons Dallion had seen in Aspions awakening room had been weapons hed owned at some point. Interesting what had happened to them.

The only downside is that weapons made of these metals are almost impossible to improve. Its far easier to save up enough money and just buy something better. Same goes for mending. While the weapon will always be in perfect shape in the awakened realm, fixing it out here would require the services of someone like me. Otherwise, you might as well be hitting people on the head with a metal stick.

Got it. Dallion looked at the sets of daggers. None of them looked bad, but there was nothing special about them. Dallion didnt see them giving him an edge in battle. With luck, he might get Captain Adzorg off his back for a day or two, but was that a good enough reason to waste money or something he was unlikely to use? What about swords?

You dont have the strength or the reflexes to handle a longer blade. Taem shook his head. Trust me on that. Maybe in a month or two You can buy a sword if you want to. Im not stopping you, but take it from me, youre not ready yet.

Thanks, but Ill take a look all the same.

The weapon smith shrugged with an unspoken its your money. Then stepped back as Dallion started looking around.

Each weapon Dallion passed by, created mental images of him wielding it. In his imagination Dallion was always cool, handling the weapon flawlessly. However, he knew full well that it was only wishful thinking. Upon reaching one weapon, however, the vision changed it felt far more familiar, almost real.

Whats this? Dallion pointed at one of the exotic swords.

It was twice longer than the short sword he was used to, with a wide place that appeared to be more frame than blade. Nine silver strings stretched between the tip of the sword and the hilt, like the neck of a guitar.

A harpsisword, Tael replied. I just keep it here for show. It came with the shop. Great for parties, useless for anything else. It takes a very specific set of skills and a lot of persistence to use that.

How much for it?

Kid, if you really want a sword, Ill give you something else on a discount. Buying that is like giving your money to the pickpockets.

Does it matter? Its my money.

If you put it that way the weapon smith glanced at Dallions money pouch. All the coins you have. Are you sure you still want it?

Dallion untied the pouch from his belt and tossed it to the man. Yes, he very much wanted that sword. He knew perfectly well it would take him months to learn how to use it, but it didnt matter. He had the time. What was more, the sword was calling out to him, resonating for the first time with the skill his mother had given him.

Chapter 92: Library Training

Returning to the inn with the very same clothes he had left, while bringing in a massive sword, wasnt the way to create a good impression. The closer Dallion got to The Gremlins Timepiece, the more he had visions of Hanna yelling his head off. The woman had been very specific: he had to get some adequate clothes of his own, and instead Dallion had done this.

What do you think, Nox? Dallion whispered. Think shell be very mad?

The top button of Dallions shirt split in two and fell on the ground.

Yeah, I hear you. Dallion sighed. Spending all his money at once wasnt the best idea. It wasnt that he had much of a choice. If there was such a thing as fate or extreme luck, it had taken place just now.

A sword that relied on music and attack skills Dallion had no idea how that might work, but something deep inside whispered that this was the weapon for him. The first thing Dallion had done upon buying it was to enter his awakened room. A new frame had appeared on his attack wall,

complete with the harpsisword. Looking at it left no room for doubt the strings matched the color of the lyre, also the moment Dallion played one, both music instruments vibrated in unison.

Anyway, it was worth it.

Entering the inn, Dallion braced himself. The innkeeper, at her usual spot at the counter, glanced at him with a typical why am I not surprised look then went back to polishing a mug.

The crowds here, she said, Put your toy in the room and get down here.

Okay. Dallion had no intention of arguing. Ill be just a minute.

You better. There are a lot of cracked things waiting to be mended. Apparently, word of last nights antics had spread, bringing in more people curious to see him in action. In a city this size, it could well be days until things returned to normal. Not bad, given that Dallion was in need of money again. Also, youll be covering for Jiroh as well. Given youre new to this, dont expect much extra.

With a nod, Dallion rushed up to his room. Technically, he had promised hed be back in a minute. For an awakened, though, a minute in the real world was equal to eternity.

Item awakening

The staircase disappeared along with the rest of an inn. In its place, an endless library hall emerged. A few steps away, sitting on a wooden table with a book in hand, the echo of Captain Agzorg let out a polite cough.

Mister Darude, the echo said in an overly formal fashion. As any high-school student knew, that was a clear indication that Dallion was in trouble. When you last mentioned that youd finish reading the Treatment of the Seven Moons momentarily, I was under the impression that you would do so momentarily, not half a day later.

Yeah, sorry about that, Nil. Thank goodness that the actual Adzorg wasnt able to share the echos thoughts. If he did, Dallion would really be in deep crap. A lot of things came up. Look what I got. Dallion drew the sword from his belt. It seemed that he could carry multiple weapons in the awakened realms, as long as he was in contact with those weapons in the real world.

Enough, Dallion had the foresight not to reveal details.

Not a fortune, I hope? Such weapons are tricky to master at best, and quite fragile in actual battle. They also require constant tuning and string replacement, and as you might expect, strings dont come cheap.

Okay, so maybe this wasnt the best deal

, Dallion thought. Still, that was for the real world. Here, he could be as reckless with the weapon as he wished and wouldnt have to replace a thing.

Personally, I would have suggested you buy a pair of daggers. They are versatile, easy to conceal, and also suitable for both close and ranged combat.

Daggers again. Ill be sure to keep that in mind. Is there anything you can tell me about the sword?

Harpsisword, the echo corrected.

Harpsisword, Dallion grumbled.

You're right, that was dumb on my part. But now that I have it, can you help me out?

The echo sighed again, then walked off to one of the far shelves. With pedantic precision, Nil took a small tome from the third row from the floor. That done, he walked a few shelves further away and took a second, much larger tome.

These might prove useful. The echo came back and placed the books on the small table where the moon scroll was waiting. In the meantime, I'll give you the cliff notes.

Dallion waited.

Err, well? he said after a while.

Well, if you had actually finished the scroll I gave you, you'd know that you could use your observation power to determine items you own the same way you see the strengths and weaknesses of guardians you're fighting. In any event, that is your harpsisword, so I was hoping you'd put in the effort.

Dallion looked at the weapon. Try as he might, no white rectangle emerged. Maybe it had to do with his perception level? The first time he saw a guardian there were a lot of things that were marked unknown. Though, even then, he was able to see the rectangle itself.

You're trying to visualize it, aren't you? the echo asked. That's a normal first reaction, but it's wrong. Think of everything here as airt has no actual presence, yet it's there. What you're doing is looking at something that doesn't exist. Instead, you should look at the differences.

Look at the differences, Dallion whispered. What did the echo mean by that?

The sword was there in his hand. He could see its shape, feel the weight, even hear the slight vibration of the strings as she slashed through the air. And still, he couldn't see any rectangle.

Look at the differences

, he thought. But what were the differences? The weapon was much flashier than the sword he'd started with, it was linked to the lyre, and thus his music skills. Was there another difference Dallion wasn't seeing?

HARPSISWORD

Level 3 Music Weapon

Combining the characteristics of Attack and Music skills, the harpsisword can be used for direct and indirect combat. Similar to music instruments, the harpsisword can vibrate to a targets emotions.

In addition to its standard use, the harpsisword can shatter targets from a distance through the use of vibrations, as long as they are in tune with the target point.

Whoa! Dallion blinked. I see it!

Yes, yes, wonderful. Nil gave Dallion a slow clap.

Its got a wicked special skill. Shattering targets from a distance. Doesnt that sound overpowered?

Now that you mention it, it does. The echo nodded. Thats why it takes about a decade for someone to learn to use it adequately.

Dallions enthusiasm suddenly vanished like steam from a kettle. A decade? That was long indeed. If he timed it right, only months would pass in the real world. While he could train here for an eternity, eating was a different matter.

That is why, I suggest you start with the basics, okay? Nil tapped Dallion on the shoulder. Youll have plenty of opportunities to become a master of the singing sword, he added with a chuckle.

Improving a weapon is done the same way you improve an item. Considering the material, its forged from youll be able to do that once you reach level thirty or so. Maybe fifty to be certain.

Just asking.

Level thirty to level up the weapon to level two? What would the echo say if Dallion shared it was at three already? What would Taem have said? The rarity alone would have added a few zeroes to the end of the price. The only explanation was neither of them knew the swords real worth, and for the moment Dallion intended to keep it that way.

I dont suppose you can tell me how to see some use instructions, can you? Dallion smiled sheepishly.

With a sigh, the echo went to a nearby section of the library and took a massive book from the shelf. Dallion watched in puzzlement, as the echo proceeded to put the tome sideways in the middle of the room, then stepped back.

Whats that? Dallion asked.

The Full enhanced Diary of Professor Thirdsworth of the Spellcraft Academy, Nil said in a bitter voice. Volume three.

Not a fan, I take it?

The man is a pompous idiot! Just because he made a few academic discoveries fifty years ago, he thinks he can subject the world to any drivel he comes up with.

For a split second, Dallion thought he could see steam coming out of the echos mouth.

Regardless, thats a story for a different time. For the moment, lets focus on the basics, which is on destroying the book. Normally objects dont have emotions, so Ill put some confusion in it.

A blue glow appeared within the book, the same hue as one of the strings of Dallions harpsisword. Looking closer, Dallion saw the string was vibrating.

There are nine basic types of emotions: joy, sadness, anger, calm, fear, tenderness, ambition, excitement, and confusion. Think of them as nine colors. All emotional states are a combination of them.

Dallion knew a number of psychologists on Earth who would have a fit if they heard Nil. The funny part was that in this world, the echo was right.

Play the string and match the emotion.

That much Dallion had already summed up from his attempts to use his lyre as a weapon. It started well, but so far, every time ended in failure. Still, he held the sword in his right hand, playing the string with the thumb of his left. Both the string and the book vibrated. This time there was something morelooking at the string, he could see a second blue line moving up the string. The moment it reached the end of the string, the tome froze still.

Everythings about balance and timing, Nil said. The correct string starts the reaction. To maintain it, you need to play it again at the right moment. Too soon and the emotional connection will collapse, too late and you would have lost your moment. Just like with people.

You mean I can use this in real life too?

Youre already using it. The echo frowned. Everyone is. A conversation is nothing more than picking up the right words that resonate with the emotional state of someone, then saying them at the right moment. Compose a good enough tune and a person would be more inclined to do what you ask. Fail and they wont be.

Just like the saying a kind word opens all doors. In this world, the phrase was very literal.

Dallion took a deep breath and tried again. This time, the line almost reached the end of the string when he played it again. The result was the same.

The first five attempts turned into ten, then fifteen. Each time Dallion was a hairs length away from achieving his goal. Unlike the games hed played, the skill was mercilessnot even a fraction of error tolerance. Time and time again, the boy achieved near success, until eventually he hit the mark.

The book's vibration turned into a tremble.

Good! the echo said with enthusiasm. You've tapped into the book's confusion. For a while it won't be able to react. Now, slice it in two!

Without hesitation, Dallion dashed forward. A red line appeared throughout the book, marking the exact place at which he would strike. Dallion changed the position of the sword slightly, raising the line just enough to create two equal sides on the tome, then performed a single slash. He expected the book to fly through the library and hit the opposite wall. Instead, it remained in its spot, the upper half falling off it.

For several seconds Dallion remained silent, still trying to figure out what had happened. Never before had he seen such an attack. This was too surreal.

Well done, the echo clapped. Took you a while, but not bad, considering.

What happened? he asked at last.

I told you that the book won't be able to react, and it didn't. Nil walked to the tome and picked up both halves with a gleeful expression. No doubt about it, he really hated that book. That's the effect you'll have on people if you do it right. Not the chopping up, although that's also possible. Getting the right notes of emotion at the right time will get them to freeze for just an instant, granting you an opportunity to strike, metaphorically speaking. This was a simple case. Often you need to follow up with more strings to achieve the effect before they freeze completely.

The skill was capable of that? No wonder it was considered rare. If his mother had known the full effect of the skill, there was no way she would have lost to a simple ring guardian.

What about objects? Does it work on those?

Dear boy, the echo smiled. Objects are merely the shell of the guardian they hold. Of course, it works on objects, as long as you find the right emotion to get to them.

Chapter 93: Blue Quartz and Armor

Music acting as a means to freeze people and objects that was one option Dallion had never considered. He'd always assumed that it might allow him to manipulate people, similar to echoes, though not in such fashion, and he didn't dream it might affect objects as well. Back when Dallion was learning the basics of awakening, his mother had told him that different people had different connections to objects. At the time, he thought of it as a metaphor. Now, he understood what she really meant: for an awakened every object was a living entity. The more one mistreated an object, the more resentful and rebellious its guardian became. It was no longer enough to be mindful of people, Dallion had to keep in mind how he treated objects as well.

Dal, you've got an improvement request here, Hannah shouted.

The yell caught the attention of the entire room.

There in a moment. Dallion placed five mugs of beer at a table, then rushed to where the innkeeper was at. The last time he had worked this much was as a fast-food temp years ago. Thankfully, the pay was much better here, and also there were tips. What's the item?

Another glass, the innkeeper replied.

That was a relief. Glasses were easy. Of course, it would have been better if he had his haprisword with him. Instead, he now had to use the lyre instead.

Lets take a look at the patient. Dallion took hold of the item. The glass wasnt of the common inn variety. The patrons had brought it themselves with the express purpose of getting it improved. Judging by its condition, this was no longer a mere test of his skills. Here we go, Dallion said and awakened the item.

The realm was close to what he expected a small glass room, leading to a round maze around it.

The condition of the glass was almost perfect, requiring only a few touches in the labyrinth to get it fully restored. Dallion finished that quickly, then went straight to the guardian level one glass condor. While similar to all other glass guardians Dallion had encountered, it had its own unique personality: the beak was a bit longer, the shards that composed the feathers a bit thinner, and its overall frame was shorter and more rounded.

Normally, it would take Dallion a single shot with the dartbow to defeat the guardian. However, he decided to spend the time getting a better grasp of his music skills. Now that he knew what to look for, it was easy determining the guardians emotions a combination of joy, calm and excitement. The moment he played the combination, blue lines appeared, growing along the vibrating strings at different speeds.

The library echo had been right, this was more complicated than the book, though not unsurmountable. It took Dallion a few dozen attempts to play all three at the right time, but when he did, the guardian froze mid-air. That was precisely what he was aiming for. Brushing off the sweat from his forehead, Dallion drew his dartbow and finished the guardian with a single shot.

GLASS Level increased

The GLASS has been improved to BLUE QUARTZ

Your MUSIC skills have increased to 2

Blue quarts? That was new. The important thing was that Dallion had leveled up his music skills. A few more times and he might get some new powers.

Oh, would you look at that? Dallion asked upon returning to the real world. The glass he was holding had acquired a fine cyan tint. Here you go.

I told you, the patron who had ordered the item improvement said to his wife. Worth every silver!

Judging by the womans expression she was of a similar opinion, as was the whole crowd clustered to get a better view of what Dallion had managed to achieve.

Calm done, everyone! Hannah shouted. This marks the last improvement of the day. If you want more, talk to me and Ill see when Dal will have the time for it.

Dal, get some rest, Hannah whispered. Take your food and go for a walk. Ill take care of things until evening.

Huh? Dallion looked at her. Why?

Your fingers are bleeding, the innkeeper added in a whisper.

Dallion looked down. His right hand seemed perfectly fine. The left, though drops of blood were dripping from three of his fingers. A painful sensation appeared, as if Dallions fingertips were burning. Thinking back, Dallion couldnt remember the guardian even getting close to wound him in any way. He also hadnt done it to himself

Grabbing a large dish of food from the kitchen, Dallion went up to his room. He wasnt able to finish a quarter of it when exhaustion kicked in. The next thing he knew it was evening, and his face was half covered in food.

Dallion quickly washed off as much of the food from his face, then cleaned his fingers from the blood. The next thing was to clean up the room as much as possible before Hannah came in. Unfortunately for him, it turned out he didnt have to. Just as he began, the door swung open, and Hannah came in, carrying a fresh set of sheets and covers.

Err, Hannah, I

Anywhere other than the bed? she asked with icy determination.

No? Dallion managed to say.

Good. Wrap it up and dont get anything on the floor.

Sure.

The two cleaned in silence for several minutes. Once the mess was contained and the sheets were changed with a fresh set, Dallion dared say the obvious.

Sorry for the mess. Wont happen again. He paused for a few seconds more. Ill pay for the cleaning.

No, you wont. If you pay me, youll get the idea that its my job to fix things for you. Everyone messes up at the start. Dont make it a habit. Understood?

Understood. He looked at his hand again. Faints scars were visible, like red lines of dark blood on the tip of his fingers.

And dont overdo it. Im sure you think youve been through a lot and have a good grasp of things. You dont. Youve just cracked the door open to a world you know nothing about. Judging by what Captain Adzorg told me, youre completely self-taught, so you dont know any constraint. That makes this a very dangerous time for you. When youre a semi, the level limit keeps your from hurting yourself. After the five she shook her head.

That was actually correct. When Dallion had started, hed exhaust himself training, but hed quickly recover. There was only so much mending that he could do. The improving, though, had its toll.

Even when fighting level one guardians he had felt dizzy after facing two in a row. Doing six per day, at his current awakening level, had left him running on fumes. He'd already exhausted his limit last night, in addition to fighting one just now, not to mention all the time spent training his new skill in the library.

Were you awakened? Dallion asked, handing Hannah the old sheets wrapped in a bundle.

I don't have to be an awakened to see the obvious! The woman snapped. The whole city is filled with your kind. You think you're the first idiot who fainted trying to rush it to the double digits? What do you think the registrations are? That way at least we don't have awakened dying from exhaustion all over the place.

Oh. Yeah, that makes sense. The boy smiled.

You've got two hours till the dinner crowd. Hannah took a coin pouch from her belt and tossed it to Dallion. The tips from lunch. Go out, get some air, buy some proper clothes this time. I don't need you scruffy or exhausted.

I will, Dallion said, although even now he knew he was lying. And I won't overdo it. Promise.

Hannah snorted and left the room. Clearly she had seen enough reckless hotheads to know that her advice would be ignored. Still, Dallion felt bad about it. Not so much for himself—he was at the age he considered himself indestructible. Rather, he felt bad, disappointing one of the three people that had helped him out in the city.

On the other hand, no pain, no gain. Dallion tied the pouch to his belt and left the room.

Evening in Nerosal came with its own unique blend of special. Three of the seven moons were glowing in the sky, their light mixing with that of the torches filling the city. The bustle and beauty of it all made it appear like any major city on Earth, combined with elegant medieval architecture.

This time, Dallion held tight to his pouch as he walked. No longer relying on a single sense alone, he'd look around searching for any tell-tell signs of pickpockets. All in all, he didn't spot any, but he managed to notice something else: other awakened. Despite knowing that there would be others like him, he had never actually spotted any outside of the guild building. Even stumbling into Taen had been more an accident than anything else. Now that he looked, that he really looked, he saw they were everywhere. Dozens of awakened walked about, like ordinary people: haggling for prices at shops and street stalls, eating, laughing, arguing. Couples, singles, whole groups, there were all sorts of them and no one seemed in the least bit bothered.

You'll see most of them out in the evenings, Jiroh said, appearing as if from nowhere. That or early mornings.

Dallion kept his cool, although he didn't appreciate being startled. Having people sneak up on him with such ease wasn't normal.

Are they allergic to light or something? he asked the first thing that came to mind.

They work during the day. The fury said, then laughed. You really have a lot to get used to.

I suppose. Why are you here, though? Hannah said you were out somewhere.

I am. I'm leaving in a few hours. Had to get some things ready before that.

Looking at her clothes, she was dressed for the wilderness. Her cloak was thick, and Dallion could notice outlines of studded leather armor beneath her shirt. Interestingly enough, she wasn't carrying any weapons.

I'll be back in a few days, Jiroh said, sensing Dallion's concern. Nothing to worry about.

A whole week? There's plenty to worry about. I'm really bad at carrying food. Absolutely terrible.

Good. You'll learn a new skill by the time I'm back.

So much for Dallion being the only one with snarky humor. Jiroh seemed to be a very go-by-the-flow person. For the two days Dallion had known her, he had never seen her worried or rushing, despite being the fastest waiter he'd ever known.

So where are you off to? she asked.

I have no idea. I'm supposed to get some clothes.

I thought you did that this morning.

Nah, I got a sword.

Sword? Jiroh narrowed her eyes. She looked at Dallion, then at the pouch he was holding. How much have you got?

Not sure. Fifty silvers? Maybe more?

A week ago, the amount would have seemed massive. After his experience with city prices, Dallion wasn't so sure.

Well, it's enough for clothes, but if you ask me, you should get some armor. And I'm not talking about your standard type. Once you start going on quests, you'll need all the help you can get. It won't be cheap, but trust me, you'll thank me later.

I told you I only have this. Maybe I'll get as much from the dinner crowd, but that's it.

Don't worry about that for now. Jiroh grabbed him by the hand, and pulled him through the crowded street. I know someone who'll be of help. She's a bit peculiar, so don't freak out.

Okay? Dallion didn't exactly like the sound of that.

Most important of all, no comments about her eyes. If the topic comes up, just ignore it. And never stare. Avoid all that and you'll be fine.

Chapter 94: The Thread Forger

The place that Jiroh's friend was at was several neighborhoods away in the direction of the city center. While not one of the incredibly opulent areas, the people living there seemed pretty well off. The houses were larger, each flawless, with its own gate and garden. When Jiroh had said that Dallion didn't have enough money, she wasn't joking. The boy's pouch suddenly didn't seem so full.

The two continued for a fair while, then took a turn towards the city lake. Within moments the houses changed from glamorous to weird. Not so impressive, and definitely worse kept, workshop-lodgings filled the street. Large, colorful signs were everywhere, showing the nature of the workshop. Tailors and carpenters seemed to be the occupations of choice, representing about a third

of the buildings. The rest were a mishmash of artists, sculptors, potion makers, and the occasional smith.

Yarn-file alley, the fury said. One of the better places to go if you need something done well and fast. Not cheap, but much better than the Radiants.

The Radiants?

Elite craftsmen. Theyve proved they are good enough to receive the Imperial Seal of approval, earning the title Radiant whatever.

Dallion stifled a chuckle. The name Radiant cobbler came to mind along with a few less flattering combinations.

Of course, that bumps up their price a lot. Until youre good enough for it to matter, this is the best place to be.

Got you. Judging by the decorations each workshop had put on their signs, Dallion had to agree. The craftsmanship was quite good, and clearly done by awakened. There was no mistaking the flawlessness and the precision that went into every detail.

Slightly further, the buildings changed, housing multiple workshops in one structure. At the end of the road, less than ten feet from the lake, Jiroh stopped at a house of grey marble. The structure wasnt different from any of the other combined workshops Dallion had passed. The garden, though, was filled with life-sized statues of various species. Humans, furies, even what appeared to be a dwarf stood in expressive poses, all positioned so as to point at the workshops basement entrance.

This is it? Dallion asked.

Yep. Jiroh nodded. Remember what I told you. No comments about the eyes.

The fury was the first to enter the basement. The room was widefar spacier than what Dallion had imagined. Tapestries of landscapes covered the walls in between shelves of clothes. The colors combinations were a brave choice to say the least, but the fabrics seemed quite good.

Eury! Jiroh shouted.

What? a flowing female voice came from the doorway across the room.

I brought you a customer. Jiroh made her way past several statues with armor on them.

Im sleeping! Go away!

Just come out here! The elf crossed her arms. Dont worry, shes always like this.

I heard that! Eury grumbled.

That was the point. Now, hurry it up. Hes got work in an hour.

Seconds passed in silence, broken only by the sound of clothes being put on. The sound was unmistakable to any awakened. It also was slightly concerning. Soon enough, the mysterious artisan appeared, dressed in a loose fitting robe. The moment she walked into the main-room, Dallion instantly forgot everything Jiroh had warned him about. In his defense it was difficult not to stand across the room was nothing less than a real-life gorgon.

As someone who grew up with games, comics, and TV, it was inevitable that Dallion knew what a gorgon was. Seeing one quickly made him rethink everything he thought he knew. The being was slender, yet muscular, like a gymnast. Tall and grey-skinned like the ring colossus he had fought a month ago, she rose half a head above him, looking at Dallion, Jiroh, and the rest of the room with tens of dozens of mouthless snakes emerging from her head. It wasn't terrifying; it wasn't even scary; it was absolutely fascinating.

New to the city, I see. The gorgon smiled.

Dallion was about to answer when a sharp nudge in the side made him quickly look away.

Dont worry, I dont mind. Eury approached. Beauty is not something I should feel ashamed about.

Less flirting, more helping, Eury. Jiroh stressed. He needs proper armor. Something discrete for guild training.

Does he? The gorgon made a full circle round Dallion. Right this moment, he felt as if he was being carefully scrutinized from a hundred cameras. Can you afford me, kid?

I think

Ill be covering the cost on this, Jiroh interrupted once more. And youre really wasting your time. Hes staying at Hannahs.

You woke me up in the middle of the night. The least I could do is amuse myself a little. All the time her face-eyes had remained closed, causing Dallion to wonder whether she could really turn living creatures into stone. And more importantly, was that the source of the statues in the yard? My name is Euryale Ceto, though some of my regular clients might call me Eury. Several more snakes turned Dallions direction. So, tell me, what is your name?

Dallion, he managed to utter. Dallion Darude.

Dallion. Nice name. Hold your hands to the side, a bit.

Dallion did as he was told.

Looks pretty standard, so there shouldnt be a lot of complications. Whats your body level?

Five, Dallion replied.

Youll have to boost that a bit. The gorgon kept circling, taking mental measurements. Well start with threads and bracelets. When you get better, Ill

Add a breastplate, Jiroh said.

The comment made Eury tilt her head in surprise. A quarter of her snakes turned Jirohs direction.

If you say so. The gorgon shrugged. Im not sure hell be able to handle it. Might cause more harm than good.

Hell get used to it. The fury tossed a single marble-like gem to Eury. I leave him to you. One hour, okay? She went towards the exit.

Have I ever let you down?

Jiroh waved, her back turned, before casually strolling out. That left Dallion alone with the gorgon, a situation he wasn't sure could be described as good.

Okay, so, what's your relation to her? Eury asked a few seconds after the fury had left.

We work at the same place.

Are you sure? This is the second time she has covered someones tab. There was a rather lengthy pause. Anyway, lets get started. So, Ji said she wanted a breastplate for you?

Err, yes. Dallion was also asking himself the same questions the gorgon was.

The Fury had been suspiciously friendly towards him. At first, he thought it was because he was new in town and she wanted to make him feel welcome. However, this was the second time she had helped him in a big way: first the introduction to the Icepicker guild, now this Dallions suspicious nature got even more suspicious.

Well, too bad. I dont believe in stifling creativity. The gorgon rubbed her hands. Now lets see what were going to do with you.

It turned out that the gorgon was an awakened as well, and a member of the seven races according to the scroll Nil had forced Dallion to read. Subjects to the white moon Emion, they were blessed with superior perception, which made sense considering Eury had full three-sixty vision.

The most fascinating thing about Eury, however, were her skills. Not only did she know awakened forging, but she had art skills as well. After a brief consultation with the echo in the library ring, Dallion had learned that art skills werent what he would have thought theyd be. Marginally difficult to acquire, they allowed a person to draw and make clothes; how they did that remained a mystery Dallion was curious to learn. The skill wasnt regarded as particularly useful, yet when combined with something like forging it allowed a person to make the equivalent of bulletproof fabric. Eury was particularly good in both, and it showed.

In twenty minutes she had not only managed to sketch up several outfits but also discuss them with Dallion, apply a few changes, then make the one she thought would be best suited. The result was astounding. The clotheslight and simplistically casual in the real world, transformed into a full set of studded leather armor when in an awakened realm. Euryale had called the process blossomingthe ability of a material to change states. The only issue was that while thread-armor was discrete and suitable for lower-level guardians, it had the strength and durability of leather, and also was completely useless in the real world.

Youll need a better place to hide the dartbow. Eury said while making some final adjustments round the shoulder of Dallions new shirt. I can have some boots ready for you in a few days. Itll cost you, or I can put it on your tab.

How much?

Four gold. Three if you find the materials.

Four gold coins... With the conversion rate of a hundred to one, that came up to a considerable sum.

Ill pay for it. I have about fifty silver now, give or take.

Okay, Ill start working on it as soon as I wake up tomorrow. The gorgon took a step back. Walk a bit.

Dallion did so. He couldnt feel any changes in the shirt, but based on Eurys reaction, there had to be a substantial difference.

Good. Now, two things to remember. Dont try to hide in your clothes. Thats the first instinct everyone has. For one thing its very uncomfortable, for another it only makes things worse. The longer you stay away from the real world, the longer your muscles need time to readjust. You dont notice it yet, because you havent gotten in any real fights, but itll put you at a huge disadvantage.

Right. Dallion remembered something of the sort happening when he had faced the chainling a while back. At the time he had only fought it from a distance, but even so the jump from the awakened realm to the real world hadnt been pleasant. And the other thing.

Give me your hand.

Item Awakening

Dallion looked around. He was in what appeared to be the vast inside of a palace, only without doors or windows.

The RING is Level 23

Twenty-three? That was definitely impressive.

You are in a vast metal domain.

Defeat the guardian to change the RINGs destiny.

Welcome to my training room, Euryale said. Metal gauntlets with dagger length claws covered her hands. A gift from my mother to keep in shape. Not my first choice, but it has its uses.

Dallion reached for his dartbow.

The second piece of advice Ill give you is how to use thread-armor in actual battle, the gorgon continued. You wont be needing your weapon. You wont be needing your shield, either. The whole point is to get used to the armor.

Despite his inner reluctance, Dallion nodded.

In a bit Ill charge at you with the intent to slash you in two. She moved her fingers, making the blades dance in the air. You already know guard skills, which will make it easier, but also more difficult. Easier, because you probably know how guard markers work. More difficult because youll have to ignore them.

You mean I have to unlearn what I have learned?

The gorgon stared at him with a puzzled expression.

Err, no. Youll have to sort through the markers. Youve done that before, I trust?

Well, no. But if you explain what Im supposed

Before Dallion could finish his sentence, Eury dashed forward. In the blink of the eye, she was a step away from him, hands extended forward, ready to slice him to ribbons. Green markers appeared everywhere. Dallion could see the exact lines at which she was going to slice, just as how to block her.

The claws of Eury's right gauntlet scraped the buckler's surface. Fractions of a second later, the claws of her left sliced through his leather armor, just deep enough to leave a mark without doing any harm to him.

Considering his options, Dallion leapt back. The gorgon didn't follow.

That's what happens when you rely on your shield, she said. Remember that you have several defense items now. Your armor will cushion a few blows, but if you really want to make use of it, think of it as its own entity. Eury removed the gauntlets from her hands. The pieces of armor immediately disappeared. Try shooting at me.

Are you sure?

Go ahead. The snakes on her head moved in amusement. You won't hurt me, I promise.

Dallion had already seen enough strong warriors to know she was telling the truth. Slowly he drew his dartbow and fired a bolt straight at her.

Time froze as he focused. The bolt split the air, flying to her chest. Before it could hit, though, Eury twisted to the side at just the right moment to avoid a direct hit. The bolt slid along the loose robe she was wearing, flying on without dealing any damage.

That's how you use thread-armor in an awakened realm. Eury stepped forward. The real strength is in their ability to deflect attacks.

Don't you need acrobatic skills to do that? It was definitely impressive, but what good a move if Dallion didn't have the skills to perform it?

Acrobatics are useful, but the item lets you do it without them. It's a guard item, after all. As long as you have it, guard markers relating to it will appear each time someone attacks you. Think of it as layers of markers one beneath the other. Right now, you see the obvious, but with enough training and perception you'll be able to spot the nuances and pick the one that's most suitable.

The awakening realm disappeared, returning Dallion into the gorgon's workshop.

Any other questions?

Dallion had a million questions. There were so many things he wanted to ask, not only about the armor, but about her skills, her home, her race. How could he not? He was standing in front of a race he didn't expect he'd ever see, even in a world like this. If there were elves and gorgons, what other races could there be?

No, no questions, he said despite himself. I need to get back to work. Thanks for the hints, Euryale, and for the armor.

Eury. The eyes of the snakes on her head winked in unison. You can call me that from now on.

Chapter 95: Guild Selection Trial

Libraries are generally not used for sleeping, Nil grumbled. If you need to, do that in your own room.

Sorry, Dallion yawned.

The night had been intense, and once again Dallion had exerted himself more than he should have. Thankfully, there had been no mysterious finger bleeding, although three customers had requested

items to be improved, and Dallion had obliged. Hannah had initially been against it, but given the amount of money offered, she had become more flexible up to a point. The fourth person who dared hint about an improvement quickly got a deathly glance thrown his way before he could verbalize his request.

At least keep the books clean. The echo pulled a tome from the table. There are better things that you could use for pillows. Like, for example, pillows.

I said, Im sorry. Dallion grumbled. The echos talking felt like the buzzing of a bee in his skull. Its not like youre much help in getting me to figure out things.

Hmph. Nil raised his chin. Learning gorgon techniques at your level is, to put it mildly, impossible. If you had read the sources I had given you, youd know that their race was blessed by the moon of perception. Your perception level would have to be a ten, at least, for you to be able to discern between markers.

As much as Dallion hated to admit it, that was the truth. After hours of trying in the awakened realm, he had finally found it more efficient just to mimic what he had seen the gorgon do. Ultimately, as long as he twisted his body at the right time and to the right extent, hed be able to avoid most attacks. Of course, he didnt need to use guard skills at all for that.

Seriously, will it kill you to help me from time to time? Dallion glared at the echo, then stretched. Or let me at least browse through the books. What good is a library if Im only allowed to read five books?

What good is a book if you dont read the five youve already got? The echo countered. Learning is a two-way street. You must be willing to learn as well, and so far, you arent. You still havent finished the first scroll Ive given you, not to mention youve only skimmed through the harpsisword manuals.

There was no denying that. The scroll was the reason Dallion had dozed off several times in the first place. It was also true that Dallion had just skimmed through the tomes, stopping a quarter in the first chapter. As interesting as weapon history was, he wanted to find illustrated instructions on poses and attacks. Alas, when he found one, it turned out that making sense of it was as easy to understand as a set of IKEA instructions. Up till now Dallion had only mastered the basic three stances and some of the follow-up attacks.

The weapon had potential; even as a sword it was better than his short sword. Its main drawback was that it remained a two-handed weapon. There was no way Dallion could use it together with his dartbow. Maybe buying a set of daggers to start with wasnt a bad choice, after all.

You might want to get dressed early today, Nil said. The guild selection will take place in a bit.

Guild selection? Dallions drowsiness evaporated. What guild selection?

The echo sighed.

Werent you told that youd be called to have your mentor determined? Estezol should have explained that to you.

Being made part of a group was a good thing, but it was happening too fast. Dallion was hoping to have maxed out his music skill by then and gotten the rest of his armor from Eury. And that didnt even take into account all the reading hed left for later. If Adzorg, the real Adzorg, found out how much Dallion had been slacking, things might get bad.

Are you sure? Dallion asked against hope.

Given that youre a full awakened you should remember at least something about echoes, Nil said in a snobbish tone. I know the thoughts of my original, and his current thoughts are how to prepare the guild for your selection. Personally, I would advise, not that you have listened to me at all, that you get in top shape, then go to the guild before youre called for. Remember, you can only make one first good impression.

Without wasting a moment, Dallion left the library ring and jumped out of bed. His body stumbled slightly, readjusting to the new reality.

Im going to the guild. He dashed past Hannah, who was, as usual, at the bar counter. No idea when Ill be back.

If the innkeeper said anything in response, Dallion didnt hear it because he was already outside and ten feet from the building. His body level increase allowed him to run a lot faster than before. Hopefully, it would also make him sweat less. Being a sweaty mess on the first day wasnt a good impression, either.

Getting to the guild turned out to be slightly more complicated than Dallion expected. He had always thought of going there once before the selection, but never gotten to it. As a result, he didnt know the best route. Thankfully, his ring echo had helped with that. On several intersections, Dallion had entered it and requested directions from Nil. To his surprise, the echo had appreciated the initiative and even complimented his fast thinking; there was hope, after all.

So, the ring was right after all. That was quite useful, not to mention scary. Using echoes as spies was probably a huge thing they were untraceable, knew everything their owner knew, and didnt seem to have any distance limitations.

Are you for the trials? a short boy with dark skin and a rather impressive set of leather armor asked. Looking at him, he was as presentable as Dallion wasnt. Combed to perfection, with meticulously proper clothesimproved to silkand several weapons, he was everything a proper awakened candidate should be. Looking at him made Dallion think of Gloria. She too had been meticulous about her clothes.

Err, no. Dallion mustered a smile. Just for the selection.

Yeah, the selection trials. The boy nodded. Im here for that as well. Nice sword, by the way. Havent seen one of those off walls.

I didnt know there would be trials. That was something that the echo had neglected to mention. A quick subsequent talk within the library had revealed that the omission had been deliberateDallion was supposed to learn the details like any other newbie guild member.

Youre definitely calm. You must have skills. Whats your level?

Nice. I just broke through to seven yesterday. Great timing. Im Falkner, by the way. He offered his hand.

Dallion. Dallion shook it. For some reason Falkners skin felt unnaturally warm. Anyway, we better get inside.

The room was emptier than Dallion expected. Estezol was there, along with a few other members of guild HR, as Dallion thought of them. Upon seeing him, the bearded man waved.

Dal! Cool of you to come. I was just about to send someone to pick you up.

Yeah, I had a feeling that I should come today. Wasnt the selection supposed to happen in a week?

Usually yes, but the influx of candidates has been surprising as of late. More and more people seem to be joining us. Mostly because of March.

With her record its hardly surprising, Falkner said. Her military record speaks for itself, not to mention her awakened level.

Master Falkner, Estezol said in an overly formal tone. A pleasure to see you, although I didnt expect you to arrive until next month.

When hearing that March would be present at the selection, I decided to come earlier.

Wise decision. I see youve already met Dallion. As a matter of fact, his entry test to the guild was conducted by March herself.

Really? Falkner sounded impressed. I had no idea.

Anyway. Dallion decided now was a perfect moment to change the subject. Where do we go for the selection?

Oh, just go through there. The man pointed at the door to the staircase. Second floor. There are quite a number of candidates, so we might be a bit short on space.

As Dallion soon found out, that was quite the understatement. The hall that he and Falkner went to was large enough to hold thirty people comfortably. At present there were above fifty. Estezol hadn't been exaggerating when he had said that there had been a lot of candidates of late. A makeshift platform with five wooden chairs on the far end of the room indicated the place the guild members would sit. Five chairs for five judges, or so Dallion assumed.

They really could invest in a bigger guildhall, Falkner said, pushing his way through next to Dallion. After today I might talk to my father about it.

I'm afraid to ask, but who is your father?

The question made Falkner genuinely smile. It was almost as if he had been waiting to hear those words for years.

Just a noble from Arlera. Don't worry about it.

In Dallion's experience, when someone said not to worry about something in such circumstances, it usually meant that the person was someone important.

What do you think the test will be like? Dallion asked.

No one knows. Falkner shrugged. They keep it secret so that no one can prepare in advance. Might be sparring, might be fighting guardians.

Sparring or fighting guardians. Labyrinth mending would have been nice, given the amount of training Dallion had received in the last few days. Then again, standard combat wasn't a bad option either.

More and more candidates arrived, filling the room to the brim. Shortly after, the actual guild members appeared. As Dallion expected, there were five of them. First was March, of course, passing through the group like a steamroller. It was outright impressive how people squeezed together despite the lack of space to form a path for her to reach the platform. Second was Adzorg, followed by three other people Dallion had never seen. According to the whispers, these were the five captains of the guild.

Close the door, please, Adzorg said, once each of the captains had taken their seats. Interestingly, he had taken the central position and not March. As you might have guessed, today we'll be holding the selection trials. Let me first address some concerns. Despite the rumors going about, we will not kick out anyone if you do poorly. This is merely for your future mentors to get an idea of your abilities and decide who they want to invite as a mentee. That said, the better your performance, the better the chances you are selected by a more experienced member.

Another round of whispers filled the room. Who were the potential mentors? How was the selection going to take place? Letting speculations continue for a while, Adzorg cleared his throat. Silence quickly was restored.

This month the selection process will be a group activity. Preliminary parties have already been selected. You can find details by awakening the eagle statues in the corridor. The echoes will tell you the location of your actual trial.

As per standard rules, your party will be led by echoes of two guild members who will evaluate your performance. Once the test is over, the guild staff will have a short discussion, after which the selection will be announced.

That didnt sound too bad. Maybe Dallion had been worried for nothing. He was just about to express his relief to Falkner, when he saw that the boy frozen petrified with fear.

Falkner? Dallion whispered. Whats

Needless to say, that anyone who doesnt reach the end of the trial will be removed from the selection process and rescheduled for next month. To the veterans who've been through this before, I can only hope I see less of you this time. The rooms are getting too small to hold you all.

A few people laughed. Most didnt.

Are there any questions?

Will March participate in the selection? someone asked. Judging by the silence, it was a question that more than one person had.

Yes. The woman said from her chair. A few of the groups will be assessed by my echo.

Which is not to mean that any captain will take on any applicants, Adzorg quickly added. We are only here to observe in an advisory capacity. Any other questions?

No one said a word.

Good. I wish you a fruitful and productive experience. Good luck and show your best.

Chapter 96: Starting Party

Dallion was placed in group four. According to his ring echo, the group number was selected completely at random. However, based on the conversations of people whod gone through the process before, there was a certain logic involved in the process. If the rumors were to be believed, the members of a group were selected in such a fashion so as to be complementary.

There were fourteen groups with five members each. The single exception was the fourteenth group, which was composed only of three. Based on this information, Dallion could come to two conclusions: the fourteenth group was the strongest, also the failure of a single group member likely resulted in the failure of the entire group.

Which group are you in? Falkner asked as he followed Dallion down to the basement level.

Four. You?

Four.

So, what was your trial with March like? Falkner asked, a tad more eagerly that Dallion would have liked.

We fought, she won, I lost, Dallion mumbled. There was no need to elaborate further. Hardly any surprises there.

The room selected for their group was small more like a closet than an actual room with large comfortable chairs and a small table in-between. Interestingly enough, Dallion had seen several identical rooms on the way here. Given how well they were kept and the quality of the furniture inside, they had to be used for something more than newbie selection.

Three of the seats were already occupied by the time Dallion and Falkner arrived. Two boys and a girl sat there, all approximately the same age as Dallion. Judging by their gear they seemed a lot more prepared for the trial than him.

Looking for group four? The only girl in the room asked. She was tall and lanky, with short black hair and multiple piercings in both ears. It was no surprise to see that all piercings were made of star silver. Judging by her clothes and additional equipment, she had to be at least well off.

Yep. Dallion took the harpsisword off his back and took a seat. Im Dallion.

The three in the room looked at each other but didnt give their names. They did appear interested in Dallions choice of weapon, though. The one to Dallions left a large youth who could pass as a bodybuilder in another world, frowned, then crossed his arms in disapproval.

Falkner, Falkner said with a smile, and took his seat.

The name received immediate reaction, causing everyone to stir. The girl even gave a curt nod in response. Either Falkners family was more important than he claimed, or rumours about Dallion had already spread throughout the guild. Thinking back, several awakened had come to check him out at Hannahs inn. It was very possible that some of them were from the newbie members.

Bel, the girl said.

Arthurows Giene, one of the guys introduced himself. Unlike the rest, he was dressed in simple clothes without visible weapons or jeweler items. He was the sort of person whod vanish in the crowd. Nondescript to the extreme average face, average pale skin tone, average short brown hair, average brown eyes And still his body posture and facial expression made up for it. The first thing that came to mind upon seeing him was the notion of a charming trickster. And this here is Cellano. He tapped the muscular guy on the shoulder. I take it its the first time for you?

It is for me. Falkner nodded.

For me as well, Dallion looked around. Other than the chairs and a few poorly drawn paintings, there was nothing of interest in the room. Any idea how this goes?

You can say that. Arthurows laughed. Its my fifth time. That said, two of the times I was so drunk I couldnt make it to the exam room, so those dont count.

That was hardly a good excuse. It also didnt explain why he failed the remaining three. Judging by his carefree nature, Arthurows wasnt too much concerned with the outcome.

I have a good feeling about this one, though, he continued. And even if it doesnt work out, theres always next time. The main thing is not to stress about it. Even temps get missions. As long as youre not a total mess up or cause problems for the guild, youre good to go.

Dallion nodded, though was far from convinced. From what I understood, if one fails the entire group fails?

Nah, nothing like that. Itll be a bit more difficult, but unless half the party gets kicked out, well have no trouble.

The girl snorted audibly. Clearly, she wasnt of the same opinion.

Also, theres a trick. Arthurows leaned forward. All you have to do is

Is not to listen to stupid advice. Estezol appeared at the entrance, carrying a tray with fourteen strange looking daggers. Dallion had no idea what material they were made of, but it wasnt anything he had seen before. The blades were pitch black, as if made of granite, while the hilts ranged from metallic-pearl to deep red jade. Up to your usual tricks, Art? The bearded man took one of the knives and put it on the table.

Not at all, sir. Arthurows shrugged with the most innocent impression Dallion had ever seen. Just letting them know the ropes. Cant have my party fail, after all.

How considerate. Estezol sighed. Everyone grab hold of the dagger.

Bel was first to put her finger on the hilt of the weapon, followed by Falkner, then the rest.

Sphere Item Awakening

The DAGGER is Level 3 of 5

You are at the START of the DAGGERS first level.

Unseal all levels to fulfil the DAGGERS destiny.

Dallion kept staring at the blue rectangles. This was the first time he had seen such a change in description. So far, every realm, be it that of an item, person, or area, had its destiny open to change. In this case, all that he could do was fulfil whatever destiny the item had.

Looking around, Dallion saw that all five members of his group were present. Based on appearance, all of them had at least two skills, as well as armor, and several weapons at their disposal. A few steps away there was another person present, one who hadnt been in the guild room moments ago.

Hello, group four, a tall man in a hooded cloak said. Even in the darkness Dallion could clearly see his face, which had the color of molten bronze. As far as anyone could tell, the man had no weapons or armor, wearing nothing but a standard adventurer gear. Im Vend, a guild elite, and Ill be observing your progress during this selection trial.

Werent there supposed to be two? Dallion whispered to Falkner.

Indeed, Dal, the man said sharply. Normally, two observers are required. However, since youre the oldest group among all candidates, it was decided that you have the maturity to act like responsible adults and not run down every corridor like a herd of cats.

There were a few chuckles.

Levels and skills, the elite said.

Dont you have that information already? Falkner asked. If Im not mistaken, that was sent along with my introduction letter when I applied.

Yes, I do. Vend gave Falkner a cold glare. However, you dont. This isnt a solo battle. The first rule when in a party is to know your strengths and weaknesses before you enter battle. In my book thats already a failure, but rules require me to give you a chance to kill yourself in actual battle.

Already failed? That wasnt a good start. Whoever Vend was, he didnt like to have his time wasted, and he definitely didnt think much of the group.

Well? He crossed his arms.

Falkner, level seven, the black-skinned boy continued unphased by the instructors warning. Attack, guard, acrobatics, and athletics.

Having four skills, even if they were the most common, was no joke, not to mention he seemed to be about five years younger than Dallion.

Attack, guard, and athletics, Cellano muttered. His voice was higher than Dallion imagined it would be. Level six.

Level eight, attack, guard, and acrobatics, Bel said, glancing around with an air of superiority.

Same. Arthurows smiled. Only, Im a level seven.

Attack, guard, and music, Dallion said. He very much wanted to ask Nil for information about sphere objects, but for the time being, that was impossible. Level six. And to boot, he was the lowest level in the group.

Now that you know each other, which you should have done at the start, Ill tell you about the trial. Vend turned away from the starting point. There

Excuse me, Dallion interrupted. What is a sphere item?

The guild elite paused, then briskly turned around, glaring at Dallion. Everyone in the group took a step back.

Anyone care to explain? Vend asked. The silence only made Dallion feel worse. Sphere items are special. No one forges them anymore. We dont know where they come from, or who made them, we only know that they come from an age before the empire. Most of them are found in the wilderness. Some are bought by nobles, some are given to the Order of the Seven. The rest circulate between shops and merchants. Sooner or later the items make their way here either as payment, or as a job.

That was a lot of new information right there. The moment he was done with the trial, Dallion was definitely going to ask Nil about details. All this talk of artefacts and a world before the empire piqued his interest. Could this be connected to Ogre Gorge near his village?

Sphere items cannot be improved or mended, Vend continued. Their destiny is preset, divided into levels, each protected by a guardian. With each level cleared, the item regains part of its abilities. Sometimes its noticeable, other times not. When you unseal all of its layers, however, a transformation takes place, changing the item into what it was supposed to be. The item we are now in is called a black-blade dagger. As youve read on the awakened note, it has five levels in total. Three of them have already been cleared. However, due to the items nature youll have to defeat each of them once more. There was a noticeable pause. Your goal is to clear the items third level. If you do, consider yourselves accepted.

On the surface, it seemed like a simple job, though Dallion suspected it wasnt. For one thing, why did it require an entire group for such a task? Also, why had only three of the levels been cleared?

Should you clear all five levels, you get to keep the item.

Really? Falkner gasped. All of us get a copy?

There are no copies. Only the person whos contributed the most will keep the prize.

Everyone looked at each other. Already plans were being madehow would they reach the end of level five, and what should be done to ensure they had contributed most. Logically, that meant that the person who killed the most guardians would get the dagger.

You cannot force anyone to remain in the trial, Vend added. You can quit at any time. If you do so before the completion of level three, youll fail. Of course, if youve shown some remarkable skill or ingenuity by then, you might get a second chance.

Things were starting to make sense. Five people, five levels, five guardians. If the strength of the guardians increased in linear fashion, it would take all five of them to defeat the last. That meant that the person who defeated the first guardian would have a significant advantage over everyone else.

Does the strength of the guardian depend on the number of people? Dallion asked.

The guardians are always the same, only you get weaker the further you go. Vend crossed his arms. One final detail. If this echo is killed before you clear level three, the entire group will automatically fail.

Chapter 97: Dungeon Crawling

The first level of the daggers realm had the appearance of a cave, with one major differenceall the passages were brightly lit up by an invisible source of light. While the effect was beneficial, it also felt unnaturally strangenot a single shadow in the cave, including the members of the group. It took Dallion several steps to get partially used to the notion. Not seeing a dark spot beneath his feet upon lifting them from the ground was just too creepy.

Does anyone have a high perception? he asked. The other members of the group looked at him with blank expressions.

Its better if the one with the greatest perception is in front, like a scout, Dallion explained. Meanwhile, the ones with greatest body and guard stats should act like t he stopped himself. There was no way anyone would understand the meaning of the word tank. Bodyguards of the group, Dallion quickly corrected himself.

The silence indicated that while not objecting, no one thought the idea particularly good either.

My perception is six, Dallion offered.

The moment he put his hat in the ring, the groups attitude changed. There was no longer the fear that he was taking advantage of them. Now it was only a matter of simple comparison, and where there were comparisons, there was pride.

Im at eight, Bel said.

Six here. Arthurows shrugged.

Cellano didnt bother saying, suggesting that his perception was the lowest of all.

Im at ten, Falkner said, as Dallion suspected he would. Anyone who had improved his clothes to such a level had to have a high level of perception. Guess that makes me the scout?

Sort of. Just walk in front. Ill be a few steps behind in case something attacks. Dallion tapped on his buckler. The attackers should be a few steps behind me, so they can jump into action when needed.

After some readjustments, the party moved forward. Given the nature of the cave, Dallion wasnt worried about attacks from the rear and, provided there were no such things as grenades in this world, he wasnt overly concerned with ambushes, either. If they faced an enemy with area attacks, though, some changes might be needed.

As they walked, Dallion kept an eye on Vend. The echo had chosen to follow the group a few steps away. Maybe that was how its owner usually behaved in group fights, but Dallion had the sneaky suspicion that the party was in for a serious attack at any moment now.

I see something. Falkner stopped, pointing forward. Some kind of reptilian creatures.

To Dallions surprise, Arthurows joined him in the front line.

Im also a good guard, Arthurows whispered, then to Dallions astonishment, drew a large shield out of nowhere. Here to lend a shield. He smiled.

Dallion had no idea how that trick worked, nor what shield exactly Arthurows had with him, but he knew he wanted one. A shield that could be carried with such ease was a huge advantage.

Thanks. Dallion drew his dartbow, while raising his buckler to protect the upper part of his torso. We go slowly.

The effort proved quickly wasted. Before they could even take a step forward, the cave echoed with the sound of running. Dozens of claws hitting rock resonated throughout the tunnel, approaching closer and closer.

White rectangles hovered above each of the creatures. There were dozens of them, filling the tunnel like a wave of water.

Dallion aimed and squeezed the trigger. As the bolt struck its target, the health in the status rectangle quickly turned to zero, before disappearing altogether. That was good, at least the creatures weren't difficult to kill, although there were so many of them. Dallion shot again, this time accompanied by two others. Three creatures of the approaching wave popped out of existence, like balloons at a children's party. Sadly, there were many more, roughly twenty by Dallion's estimates.

Green markers appeared on the ground, though this time there was something different. Dallion could see Arthurows as well, colored in a deeper shade of green.

This must be what it's like fighting in a party, Dallion thought as he let out another bolt. Arthurows, on the other hand, drew a sabre from the air. It remained a mystery how he did that, but the question would have to remain for later.

Stand back! Cellano leapt over them, holding a two-handed sword.

A red arc appeared all over the first wave of creatures. Moments later, Cellano did his strike. The tip of the sword passed through four creatures, reducing their health totals to forty percent. The muscular teammate didn't stop, following up with a second slash.

Show off, Arthurows whispered with a grin.

How many left? Dallion shouted.

Twenty-seven, Falkner said.

An impressive number. Even if weak, the creatures were going to overrun them soon. Why wasn't the rest of the group helping, though? Instants later, target markers emerged on multiple amphibians, followed by a rain of daggers.

Keep it up! Dallion kept shooting.

The creatures faltered. Having half of them killed off, as well as a sword-wielding maniac spinning in their midst, quickly forced them to change tactics. Instead of continuing with the charge, all remaining enemies leapt at one spot, merging into a giant copy of themselves that filled the entire tunnel.

It was just like the time Dallion had fought a pack of puma-like creatures in the realm of a well. From what he remembered, the new beast would have the combined health of all the ones that composed it, also it would be considerably more intelligent.

All back! Dallion shouted. That thing is

Before he could finish, Falkner leaped above him, heading to the new foe. Spinning through the air with the skill of an Olympic gymnast, he landed on Cellanos shoulders, then propelled himself forward. A new set of markers had become visible in the airwhite markers connecting each other through a series of white wavy lines.

The boy made a somersault above the monster. As he turned, a series of attack markers appeared on the amphibions head. Falkner drew two dartbowsfar fancier than Dallions ownand fired three sets of two bolts from each.

Before the monster could let out a roar of pain, Falkner let go of the weapons and drew his sword. Taking advantage of his momentum, he slashed in a downward arc. A swishing sound followed, after which the gigantic monster was suddenly gone.

High perception, Acrobatics, and ranged weapons the fighting style reminded very much of Gloria, too much for it to be a coincidence. Someone had to have taught her. Could it be that despite his echo, the village chief had prepared her for that?

All markers vanished.

Sorry for the delay, Falkner said with a smug expression. Im better at one-to-one fights.

There was no doubt in anyones mind he was showing off. At the same time, no one dared say a word about it. Arguing with the son of a noble wasnt the best choice, especially at his level of skill. He wasnt the only one Dallion was impressed with. Excluding their abysmal tactics, every member displayed skills far superior to his own. Cellano was fast and confident enough to charge a horde, Arthurows could draw items from thin air, and Bel was a master in throwing knives. However, what was Dallion good at?

What were those? Dallion turned to Vends echo. Cracks?

Neither cracks, nor echoes, Vend replied. The Academy calls them blockers. Their only purpose is to keep us from clearing the level. Like the guardians, they reappear each time you enter a sphere items realm.

Just like in video games,

Dallion thought.

Can we get anything from them? Arthurows asked.

No. They are nothing but a nuisance. Better get used to them, theres a lot more until you reach the level guardian.

Do we get an achievement if we kill them all?

Art, Vend sighed. Your only choice is to kill them all. Why do you think theyre names blockers? Their only purpose is to block people going forward. If youve reached the guardian, it means theres none of them left to block you.

Figures. Arthurows shrugged.

We go on like before? Falkner had already gone a few steps forward. I dont see anything in the next five hundred feet. Think we should run till the end, Dal?

Slow and steady wins the race. Dallion returned his dartbow to his holster. Theres no telling what we might find.

Good job, by the way, Bel said as she passed by. The group thing was a good idea.

This was officially Dallions first compliment. Not the best one possible, but at least he was no longer considered an outsider. Maybe that would earn him a few contribution points going on? If they managed to reach the fifth level. This was the very first encounter, and already it was much more difficult than what Dallion had faced in the realm of the well.

Going forward, the group picked up the pace slightly, although everyone had their guard up. Discussions were scarce, mostly comments on skills and weaponsthe first signs of opening up. The next common battle followed minutes later.

The creatures attacking were the same, and just as before, Dallion found himself issuing orders. Directing four people should have been the simplest thing possible, yet for some reason no one here seemed to grasp it. Looking at them, Dallion had no doubt that each of his group members could take down the wave of amphibions on their own, but working together proved a challenge. It was almost like watching a cat learning to walk with slippers.

Defeating the last of the creatures, the group went on. The cave tunnel went on and on, curving slightly as it did. It was as if they were walking along one giant spiral. Every now and again it would straighten, indicating a new group of enemies was about to attack.

With each battle, coordination improved. Roles and positions within the party shifted. Given their kill rate, Cellano moved to the front, alongside Falkner. Bel and Dallion took the second row, using ranged attacks to diminish the number, while Arthurows took the rear, with the role of guarding the echo of their future instructor, should any of the enemies pass through. All in all, it was a sound idea, although Dallion suspected that Arthurows was using it as an excuse to slack off.

Alas, the smoother their fights became, the more concerned Dallion got.

Guys, how many were there in the last group? he asked.

Fifty-seven, Cellano said.

More like fifty-nine. Falkner corrected.

Any chance they could have been sixty? Dallion wondered.

Could be. Why

And the last time they were fifty-five?

I guess What are you thinking?

Sir, Dallion turned to Vend. Do blockers depend on the size of the group?

No. They are always one and the same, the echo replied. No matter if its one person or a hundred.

Dallions puzzle mind took over. A pattern had formed. The logic seemed flimsy at first. Nothing but a coincidence, but with each battle, his silly theory had got one step closer to being confirmed.

The first fight included thirty-five enemies, which was five times seven. Each subsequent fight the number increased by five. So far, they had gone through six waves, which suggested the next would be the last before the guardian.

The next fight well face sixty-five of them, isnt that right? Dallion asked. And the first guardian will follow.

March didnt exaggerate. Vend smiled. You catch on quickly. Just be sure not to die till the end.

Everyone stared at Dallion, but his mind was elsewhere. This wasnt the first artifact hed seen with similar numbers. The awakened shrine had also had five trials, each helping Dallion to increase his level. Could this be the same? Very soon hed find out.

Chapter 98: Combat Preparation

Dont let them form a group behind us! Dallion shouted, shooting at the creatures flying towards them.

The last wave of amphibions had turned out far more imaginative than the ones before. Initially seventy in number, they had quickly merged into two monstrous entities blocking the tunnel entirely. In itself that was not too bad it gave Falkner and Cellano a chance to take out one each. What made things more difficult, or interesting as Veil would say, was the fact that each of the amphibion mountains hurled smaller entities of themselves at the group, like buckshot.

Easy for you to say! Bel grumbled, throwing knife after knife. Takes you only one bolt to kill one. Takes me three knives!

Falkner also proved not to be the best support. At the sight of the large entities, he had rushed forward, only to freeze halfway there when they had started hurling creatures at him. It was only thanks to Arthurows quick reaction and massive shield that the youngster had been saved. That left Cellano, who was forced to take the role of both the groups front tank and main attacker. Meanwhile, creatures were grouping at the partys rear.

Protect Vend! Dallion shouted. Falkner, Art, we need you at the back!

If this were a game, Dallion would have rage quit on the spot. The chaos had been so devastating that even the enemy creatures had paused for a few seconds out of pity. That was the typical result of overconfidence acting on ones own accord without realizing how outclassed they really were.

No wonder so many guild newbies failed their first selection. Coming from the city, they probably were rich in theoretical knowledge, but lacking even the most basic combat intuition. Dallion was

the complete oppositemostly self taught, thought acquired experience through battle. At present that gave Dallion a huge advantage ahead of the rest provided they didnt all die in the items first level.

Falkner! Dallion shouted again. He so much wanted to yell at the boy, but knew that would be counterproductive. As furious as he was right now, he had to take the smart approach. You got this! Get back and protect Vend. Thats the most important job right now!

Come on, kid, snap out of it!

Cellano! Use your guard skills to reach a time freeze, then use the bonus to land a good multi attack! Art, provide cover for Falkner, then help with deafening the back of the group. Bel, switch to melee combat. As long as they dont hit anyone, dont bother with the fliers!

Any idea how many weve killed? Dallion asked.

Seven, maybe ten, Bel shouted back.

Dallion gritted his teeth. These were not the numbers he was hoping for. That meant that in a best-case scenario, there were over fifty enemies left.

Falkner! Dallion shot another flying enemy.

Thankfully, this time the boy reacted. Raising up from the ground, he dashed towards the back of the group, dartbow in hand. Getting some free space, Cellano started slowly retreating, still slashing what he could.

All that was needed now was

Theyre grouping behind us! Bel shouted. Its another big one! What must I do?

If at this point the two monsters in front charged forward, there was nothing to stop them. Vend, and the entire party, would be squished like a waffle between two anvils.

Art, come here and cover me for a bit! If there was a time for a gamble, it was now.

You sure about this? The other asked.

Just come here!

If you say so. Arthurows did a backwards dash, stopping in front of Dallion. Whats the plan?

Make sure nothing hits me. Dallion threw his dartbow on the ground and took his harpsisword. He would so much have liked another few days to polish his skills, but this would have to do. Taking a deep breath, Dallion looked at the enemies. Blue markers appeared all over the large blue creatures

in the distance. It wasn't one creature Dallion was looking at, but a whole cluster of them surrounded by one giant wrapper of flesh. Blue smudges moved about like grapes.

Three hues were dominant, which suggested three strings. Holding his breath, Dallion played the strings in question. Blue markers emerged along with the sounds, starting their inevitable journey to the tip of the sword. Dallion felt sweat form on his forehead as he concentrated.

A sharp tone filled the air, followed by two more. There was a moment of confusion among the party. Dallion's team-members had no idea what was going on, and he was too focused on what he was doing to tell them. Thankfully, primal instincts soon took over.

Cellano was the first to charge. Taking advantage of the enemy's pause. He rushed to the nearest and performed a series of slashing arcs all over its body. The creature stirred, gurgled, then abruptly shrunk to a third of its original size. Cellano didn't stop slashing.

At that point, Dallion saw Falkner from the corner of his eye, drawing his own melee weapon. That could only mean that the enemies behind the group had also been affected by the music, giving the boy an opportunity to strike as well.

Damn it! Dallion said. His temples were pulsing as if his head was about to explode. That was the greatest shortcoming of the music skill so far the only way he had achieved several successful streaks was through extreme concentration. Combining that with the pressure of the situation and he felt as if he'd spend an all-nighter reading on a computer screen.

Good one, Dal. Arthurows tapped him on the shoulder. Chill for a bit. I got you from here.

Thanks. Dallion closed his eyes. In his current state, he could only rely on the others. Fear and the memory of the chaos that had ensued minutes ago quickly made him open them back up again.

Vend was still alive, which was always a plus, as were the rest of the party. The enemies, however, were on the verge of being eradicated. With the creatures behind the group killed, Falkner and Bel

had joined Cellano in fighting off what remained of the force in front. The two mountains now reduced to five small amphibians, which were then killed off by knives and swords.

We got them! Falkner shouted, exuberant at their success. We got them! he rushed to Dallion.

Yeah, yeah, I heard you. Dallion smiled. It felt nice being a team leader. Is everyone okay?

Everyone looked at each other.

I think I'm down five percent, Arthurows said in a manner that suggested that he likely was more. Took some hits when I was guarding you guys.

I'm good, Cellano said in a deep voice.

Before the rest could join in with a comment or two, clapping echoed throughout the tunnel.

Well done. The echo of Vend approached. You've passed the first hurdle. I'd like to say you did well, but let's just say that you did well enough. From here on the real challenge begins.

The comment made Dallion feel dizzy. That meant that the first guardian would be stronger than what they had faced now. The only ray of hope was that the guardian was one creature, so maybe there would be less panicky chaos and more slashing and shooting.

Can you tell us how many groups have reached this far? Dallion asked.

No, but I can tell you that three groups have failed so far. Vend leaned against the wall.

Three groups not as much as Dallion had feared. Strictly speaking, he was unsure whether to be happy about it or not. Knowing that only three had failed meant that the trial couldn't be that difficult. Then again, if Dallion's party was to fail, it would mean that his group was incredibly weak in comparison to most others.

Wow, talk about tough. Arthurows shook his head. The guilds really pulled all the stops on this test.

What do you mean? Dallion asked.

Trials are given in order. When Estezol came to us he'd already passed through the three groups before.

That meant that all groups so far had failed? Are you sure? Maybe they followed a different order this time?

Nope, it's always like this. The only reason our echo knows is because its owner knows in the real world, and that's only possible because Estezol likely told him before starting the test for our group. After we're done, he'll move onto the next.

That was right. Dallion had already spent a month as an awakened, and yet he still had trouble thinking like one. Regardless of the length of each group's trial, win or lose, in the real world only a moment would have passed. At this very instant, Estezol was probably standing in the room, his tray at the ready. When everyone removed their fingers from the test dagger, he'd pick it up and move to the next test room.

One had to admit awakened tests were very efficient in terms of time, even if it took a while to wrap one's mind around it.

Wait, how can he tell whether they had failed or not? Dallion asked. Maybe all of them have succeeded?

The dagger, Vend said. With each completed level the dagger reacts. Complete all, and the entire item changes. Even a world-bound would know that.

Ah. Right. Thank you for the explanation, sir. Dallion looked at the instructor, then at the rest of the group. Except for Arthurows, the rest were ready to continue on. Err, maybe we should rest a bit? Dallion suggested. Next up is the guardian. Weve no idea what to expect, so maybe we should take a few minutes and come up with a strategy?

Deathly silence filled the cave.

Also, I could really use some rest, he added.

Now that he had unequivocally shown that he was the weakest of the bunch, the rest gladly sat on the ground near him. This couldnt be normal. Or could it? If guilds had to go through all this each time with all new members, no wonder the captains never chose a newbie to mentor.

I dont suppose you can tell us what the guardian is, sir? Dallion asked with hope.

Its something stronger than anything youve fought so far, Vend replied with slight annoyance.

So much for that.

What do you think it is? Falkner quickly asked Dallion.

I have no idea. I suspect, though, that it will be very fast.

All eyes focused on him.

Why?

Because all enemies so far have been slow. Granted, so far, they had only faced one type of enemy. Think about it. Until now, the dagger has tried to drown us with numbers. It tried standard waves, giant monsters, ranged attacks, but none of them were particularly fast. If I were making the trial, Id definitely put us against something with great speed to take advantage of our lack of coordination. He paused for a few moments. Or something invisible.

You think well face something invisible? Bel asked.

Normally Dallion would laugh if anyone had come to him with such a cliché. However, there was one major differenceDallions advice had helped the group quite a bit, not to mention his music skills were the only reason they hadnt failed. Despite his shortcomings, he had gained their trust, and from his mouth even clichés sounded wise.

Okay, listen up. Dallion smiled. This is what well do.

Chapter 99: First Level Guardian

Done resting? Bel asked, arms crossed.

Just a few more minutes longer, Dallion replied with a smile.

Okay. The girl gave him a concerned look. Better increase your body first chance you get. Its not healthy being so fragile.

Leaning against the cold cave wall, Dallion took a deep breath. Everyone had agreed to his plan, which was good with luck there would be less chaos and general disorganization during the next battle. Dallions main concern, though, remained.

Waiting patiently for the pain to decrease to tolerable levels, he glanced at Vend. The would-be instructor had agreed to share a thing or two about the life of a guild elite mostly the equivalent of war stories though he had flat out refused any hints that would help in the trials to come. All that he said was that he expected the party to defeat this boss, but fail at the next one.

Things okay? Arthurows asked as he leaned on the wall next to Dallion. You dont look too good.

Im fine, Dallion lied. Not listening to the stories of an elite?

Ive done this five times, remember? The stories get boring after the second time.

Yeah.

So, March picked you, eh?

The question came as a surprise.

Does the entire guild know? Dallion let out a bitter laugh.

By now the entire city knows. Thereve only been a handful that have caught her attention ever since she came here. Its normal that people would be curious. As far as I know theres only been one other she has trained personally in the guild. Then again, you cant believe everything you hear. Maybe there were more, but things ended badly for them.

The entire city knows? When Hannah had mentioned there were a few awakened at her inn to check him out, he thought she meant a few as in a dozen at most.

Come on. Youre pulling my leg. There cant be that many people interested in me.

Trust me on this. Arthurows expression became deathly serious. Youve been a topic in discussion in several taverns I frequent, and thats not even among people I know.

Dallion turned pale. Back on Earth, he had dreamt about going viral on YouTube. Those dreams had never materialized, resulting in a long dead channel and three subscribers. A simple fight here and he had gotten more fame than he could imagine no, not fame, infamy in the very literal sense. People hadnt approached him because he was a level six awakened, they did so because they were curious why March had selected him. If it wasnt for her, would people at the guild treat him so nicely? Would anyone? What if the whole reason he was getting so many requests at the inn wasnt because of his skills or performance but because of that one random admission test with March?

Hey, dont feel bad. Arthurows gave him a pat on the shoulder. Lots of people would kill to get the chance you have. Just keep it cool and dont blow it, okay?

Yeah Kill to get the chance never sounded good, even when it was just an expression. Ive rested. He stood up. Lets go.

Not a word was necessary to get the rest of the party to prepare. Being awakened, there was little that went on that they couldnt hear. Anything spoken out loud might as well have been shouted throughout the entire tunnel. Just as Dallion had listened in on some of Vends stories, the others had overheard the conversation between him and Arthurows. That was a problem for another time. Right now, there was a guardian to deal with.

The cave continued for another few hundred feet, ending in a large cavernous chamber. A large bronze gate, the size of a building, was visible in the wall on the other side right behind an enormous leopard creature snoozing on the ground.

LEVEL 1 GUARDIAN

Species: Light Thunder Leopard

Class: Lightning

Statistics: 100% HP

What are the skills and weak spots? Dallion asked Falkner in a whisper. I can only see up to the stats.

I cant see them either, the youngster replied. All I see is species, class, and statistics.

Interesting. The white rectangle was different in sphere items as well. Of course, that meant that Dallions party was at a disadvantage. The only thing they could assume was that the guardian had the qualities of lightningfast and zappy.

Guess you were right about the speed, Bel whispered.

Do we charge it? Cellano asked.

Hold a moment.

Dallion thought. Using all his senses, he couldnt detect anything strange about the creature. The breathing was rhythmic, the pulse was slow, it was just like any big cat snoozing away most of its time. The temptation to launch a surprise ranged attack was enormous. If things would get more difficult from here on, why not take any advantage given?

Im charging it. The large guy drew his weapon.

Wait! Dallion whispered. Thats not the right way to go.

Its there. Its defenseless. If youre scared stay here with Art.

All the other creatures charged us the moment we were in earshot. Why does the guardian behave differently? Dallion glanced at the lightning leopard. It hadnt moved an inch. Stay in the tunnel, he whispered to the rest. Art, give me some defense. Everyone else, be ready if it charges.

You really think its a trap? Cellano arched a brow.

Three groups have failed so far. If the guardians were so easy, at least one of them would have made it to the end of level three. Dallion drew his harpsisword.

Using his music skills could well initiate combat, so Dallion didnt. Instead, he slowly took a few steps forward, walking past Arthurows.

You sure about this? Art asked

Dallion wasnt, but smiled nonetheless. If he was wrong about this, it would hardly matter. Given the strength of the previous wave of enemies, a surprise attack wasnt going to change much. Or would it?

Were ready, Dallion said, gripping his harpsisword.

Nothing happened.

Dallion took a few steps further.

Guardian, were ready for the trial.

Idiot, someone whispered behind.

Guardian!

The leopard opened its eyes. Parts of the guardians body shifted from their present position into the air, like puzzled pieces moving from one shape to the next. In two blinks of the eye, the creature shifted from snoozing state to upright state.

COMBAT INITIATED

Uh, oh.

Green footsteps covered the floor, encompassing the entire area around Dallion and the rest. The guardian was about to attack, and there was no telling which direction it would come from.

Blue streaks appeared all over the leopard, but they were very different from before. Emotions moved from one part of its body to the next, changing so fast that Dallion couldnt spot the correct combination.

Four red lines appeared diagonally on Dallions body. His body moved on instinct, using the harpsisword to block the attack. To his surprise, a set of green sword-like markers appeared.

Barely completing the sequence on time, Dallion was able to get the harpsisword in the correct position as a giant paw sent him flying backwards.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has decreased by 5%

Five percent through a block? That guardian definitely was something.

However, the attack was also the signal for the rest of the party to spring into action. When discussing the plan, a short while ago, Dallion had suspected that the guardian might be overwhelming, so the best option was to use the same tactics the amphibians had used on the party.

Bel and Falkner darted forward on either side of the leopard at full speed. Aiming at the guardians head, launched their projectiles, commencing a ranged pincer attack. Dallion could see the target markers flash all over the leopard. Surprised, the creature growled, slashing at Bels daggers. As it did, four bolts pierced its unprotected side, sending it into a roaring frenzy.

You okay, buddy? Arthurows dragged Dallion by the shoulder and lifted him up to a sitting position.

Worked on a chainling, worked here as well, Dallion whispered with a grin.

Say what?

Nothing. Dallion stood up. He was still a bit shaky from the attack, but the harpsisword was in one piece then again, there was no way it wouldnt be. Join in the fight for support. Ill be with you in a bit.

Whatever you say. Arthurows summoned his shield and went into the main chamber.

Bel, Falkner, and Cellano were doing a good job of attacking the guardian from multiple angles. When one became the focus of the leopards wrath, the other two attacked from the side. It was a pretty standard approach, which the guardian wasnt expecting. Forced to face newbie guild members had clearly made it overconfident. Several minutes in and its health had already dropped to forty-one percent.

Now for the coup de grace.

Dallion focused on the leopards torso. The pain in his temples spread to the rest of his head, yet he kept on staring. The blue hues slowed down to a crawl. For a few seconds, he could see the guardians heart beating with anger and excitement. Then, Dallion played the strings. It happened without looking. He could feel them calling out for him, guiding his fingers to the right place at the right time. A few notes appeared, then more, forming a melody.

The leopard turned his way. No longer attacking those surrounding it, the creature dropped its guard completely, heading towards Dallion. Confusion replaced fear, which then became calm.

Go all out! Arthurows shouted in the background, his voice drowned out by the music Dallion was playing.

For these few moments he felt as if there was a connection between the strings and the guardian; not only that, he felt he was the connection, causing the two to vibrate in sync through the use of his skills. Just a little bit longer and

Enough for now. Vend took hold of his hand. The connection vanished.

Feeling like a fish out of water, Dallion looked around. He knew exactly where he was and what was going on, and yet it all seemed like a dream. It was as if a heavy blanket of confusion was placed on his head, pushing him down.

I'll take that for a while. Vend took the harpsisword.

Why? Dallion asked, doing nothing to stop him.

The fight is over. You've won this one.

Oh? Dallion looked towards the lightning leopard.

The guardian was just as confused as he was looking at the people attacking him with annoyance, like a cat being sprinkled by water, but too lazy to move away. Its health had gone into single digit territory, and with all four members joining in, it was a matter of seconds before everything was over.

I'll keep this for a while, okay? Vend stepped a few steps back.

Okay. Dallion turned back towards him. But why?

So, you don't fall on it when the pain strikes.

A second later, a wave of pain sent Dallion writhing to the cave floor.

Chapter 100: Level 1 Cleared

No one but Vend witnessed the agony that Dallion went through. The wave of pain felt as if lasted for hours, while in reality only seconds had gone by. During that brief moment of his lurching in pain on the floor, the rest of the group was preoccupied with an entirely different event—the rectangle announcing the guardian's defeat.

All of a sudden, the pain stopped, leaving nothing but a lingering memory. Time remained distorted for several seconds longer. When Dallion had regained a good enough grasp of reality and raised his head, Vend was standing above him, a hand extended in his direction.

Don't tell anyone of this. Vend formed the words though his lips, barely letting out a sound. Nothing happened. You just hurt your back when you were thrown back.

Dallion nodded.

Good job. Vend returned the harpsisword. I didn't expect you to do so well.

Dallion felt like crying. The party's entire approach had been one jumbled mess since the start. Even so, finally getting some actual praise felt nice.

We'll talk more in the real world. Now, though, go see what you've gained.

Sheathing his weapon, Dallion did just that, entering the large chamber.

Dal, come on, Arthurows over his shoulder. We're not getting any younger.

DAGGER Level 1 has been cleared!

Claim your focus that suits you best and continue on to fulfil the DAGGERS destiny!

Interestingly enough, there was one more option offered. The rectangle had no name or color, with nothing but "two of twenty" displayed. Traditionally, when something was hidden, that made it all the more valuable in the eyes of Dallion. Maybe it was a new skill, or even one of the hidden attributes. Investing in it had a large chance of proving useful in the long run. At the same time, he really could use some mind improvements if he wanted to use his music skills for more than slicing library tomes.

What did you pick? Falkner asked, taking a step back. I chose mind, so Im an all out ten. He beamed.

Thats good. Dallion smiled. If it wasnt for the boys cheerful expression, it could have seemed like he was bragging.

Yep, definitely. Now even if I fail, I have a chance of being selected.

Thats a bit pessimistic. Not to mention confident. What was so special about reaching ten? Other than it marking the limit of the level cap, Dallion couldnt see any significance.

Party trials are the toughest ones. I thought wed do sparring or fight echoes of the older guild members until we drop. The fail rate of this is far greater.

Not by much, Arthurows interjected. Besides, we have Dal with us. Theres no way well fail!

Hurray us, Dallion grumbled beneath his breath.

The gate revealed a spiral ramp leading to the level below.

Is the length of the levels the same? Bel asked.

Depends on the item, but in this case yes, Vend replied. Youll roughly face the same number of enemies on each level up to the third. Occasionally the item throws in a few surprises of its own, but thats unlikely to happen.

What surprises? Dallion quickly asked.

It wont happen, so dont worry about that. There are enough other things that should concern you.

That was the most annoying answer Dallion had heard, worse than a cliffhanger! However, Vend did have a point. The creatures on the first level were simple and still they had come close to overwhelming the party. By definition, the second level had to be two times as difficult.

Cellano, take the lead, Dallion said.

Not Falkner? the large one asked.

Low visibility. If someone attacks us the moment we get down, youre the best to react.

Thankfully, there was no surprise attack at the end of the staircase. The chamber was pretty much identical to the one in which the party had fought the leopard. Walls of veins of silver surrounded them, leading to a large tunnel on the opposite side of the chamber.

Seven waves and a guardian, Arthurows noted. Could be worse.

Okay, we take the standard formation. Dallion took hold of his dartbow. For the time being, he was going to rely on that alone. At most, hed use the harpsisword as a common sword. Everyone okay on health? The rest of the group nodded. Good. Lets go.

It didnt take long for the first group of creatures to show uplarge rat-like vermin that charged at the party in groups of five. Three bolts and two knives instantly split the air, burying themselves in several of the creatures. However, that didnt kill them. Instead, the large rats burst into a mischief flooding the floor with miniature versions of themselves with large teeth and glowing red eyes.

Back! Dallion shouted as the river approached. Revert to melee! Slashing attacks!

Half of the group did just that, waving their swords with extreme ferocity. Arthurows, of course, was quick to rush back and away under the pretext he was taking Vend to safety. Dallion didnt like the approach, although there was nothing he could do. That was one of the shortcomings of a group trialeveryone passed or failed together.

What are those things? He asked and quickly regretted it, as white rectangles filled the corridor.

Class

: Earth

Rarely had Dallion seen a name describe a creature so fully. It combined two of the most disgusting creatures into one squeaky package. It was a relief that they were no stronger than echoes, but the fact that they could poison people had him worried. So far, he had no idea how poison worked in the awakened realm.

Back on Earth, Dallion remembered getting bit by a snake while camping. He was too young to remember the type of snake, or much of the incident altogether. What he did remember was that he felt a deep fear and loathing towards snakes for years afterwards.

Large rats joined the flow of small rats as they pushed on, only to be sliced mercilessly by Cellano, who was holding out the tunnel pretty much on his own. In a one-to-one fight he would probably be an impossibly difficult opponent to beat. His strikes were precise and not wasteful in the least. Falkner and Bel acted as a second line, killing off the few remaining creatures that trickled past.

I'll take care of the big ones! Dallion shouted, shooting forward.

Thinking about it, the party had effectively created a blender: Dallion would even the mixture while the rest would slice it to a pulp. Only why did it have to be so disgusting. With every toothroach killed, the stench in the tunnel increased to the point that Dallion feared he might actually puke. Thankfully, once all creatures were eliminated most of the smell disappeared with them.

What a way to start. Dallion shook his head. I can't see us facing larger quantities of these things. If there's any more they might flood the whole tunnel.

I don't think so. Falkner moved closer to the ground, then slid a finger over the stone surface. There were no marks. I don't think the next waves will be that. This could be one of those surprises that Vend spoke about.

What do you mean? Dallion moved closer.

The floor is too smooth. Not ideal for tooth roaches. Maybe these don't have anything to do with the trial?

Even if they didn't, the possibility of facing another batch of them remained.

You know a lot about monsters.

Yeah, my father made me read up on most of the basic creatures and guardians.

Nice. Dallion made a mental note not to slack in his studies. Once this trial was over, he'd spend half a day every day reading books in his ring library, potentially without complaining. Need any rest, Cellano?

I'm fine, the other replied, brushing off the sweat from his forehead. Roaches I can deal with.

You've dealt with them before?

I've been on a few mending missions. Full of roaches.

Dallion swallowed. When Estezol had said that the guild took tasks other guilds avoided, Dallion didn't think that meant sanitation or whatever the local equivalent was.

Also, don't worry about bites. Their poisons slow. We'll need to stay here for days for anything serious to happen. At most you'll feel a slight itch.

A few minutes later, the group was back in formation and marching on. The further in they went, the larger the tunnel became. Columns became a common occurrence, linking the floor to the ceiling. If size was an indication, the next enemies the party would face either was a lot bigger, or much greater in number. Either way, the unease in Dallion's stomach grew.

When after five minutes, no enemies were to be seen, he knew something was not right.

Stop, Dallion said, looking around. Well rest a bit by that column. If only he could connect to the library! This was the ideal time for him to get adequate information from Nil. Linking his awakened room to this place, though, was out of the question. There was no telling what might seep through.

Whats the matter? Bel asked. She, too, seemed on edge.

Nothing, Dallion replied. And I mean nothing. We should have come across some creature by now. Instead Suddenly the most terrifying thought came to mind. Falkner, do you know anything that turns invisible?

Invisible guardians? the boy blinked. Not that I can think of. What are they?

They dont have to be invisible, just something that

Falkner, Dallion began speaking in a very calm and quiet voice. What can you tell me about shardflies?

Hmm? Curiosity made the boy look up. Wow. He almost smiled. Ive never seen so many. My aunt keeps a roomful as pets. The crystal ones are nasty, but the rest arent particularly dangerous. Think of them as butterflies with stone wings.

Butterflies with stone wings Was this the reason Vend had suggested they wouldnt pass the second guardian? Judging by the patches of creatures on the ceiling, Dallion had walked beneath several groups without even noticing.

I think we should go back, Dallion whispered. Slowly and quietly.

Why? Cellano grumbled in a low voice. Even if they merge into a few giant ones, they wont harm us much.

The test isnt only about us Dallion looked at Vend. A moment later, everyone else joined him.

This was itthe obvious trap that everyone fell in. On the surface, this level was nowhere as difficult as the previous one. The only enemies they had faced were insectsplentiful, annoying, but by no means lethal. At least that was what they would have been, if the group didnt have an echo to protect. One single wound and the Vend disappear along with their chances of succeeding in their trial.

We go back slowly, then part of us return and

Arthurows sneezed. It wasnt even a loud sneeze the shardflies hadnt even noticed. Unfortunately, in his eagerness to put his hand on Arthurows mouth, Falkner rushed towards him. One of the boys dartbows hit the nearby column, letting off a sharp metallic sound. A chorus of flapping wings filled the tunnel