

Leveling up 151

Chapter 151: Return of the Self

The further Dallion ran on along the surface of the innermost cube, the more it became obvious that there wouldn't be any entrance. What windows he had seen before had disappeared, along with edges, cracks, and even seams. It was as if he was running one solid chunk of concrete. There was no place he could turn, nowhere he could hide from the three echoes pursuing him and their ranged attacks. However, if there was one thing this world had taught him, it was that nothing was as it seemed. Actually, that wasn't correct. Things were exactly what they seemed, as long as one had the ability to see beyond the surface.

The solid surface changed. Dallion could now see the fragmented emotions running through it: reluctance, fear, resistance. Every inch of stone was set up in such a way so as to repulse him. That was why the closer he got the less openings there were. However, even with that much effort, cracks remained. Dallion could see them like threads of electric current moving about, constantly sliding between other emotions. From time to time several of them would converge, creating a small well, before branching off in different directions once more.

Nox, claw there! Dallion pointed at a spot on the ground at which three currents were circling in a loop.

Uncertain, the crackling clawed on the stone surface, precisely on the spot Dallion had envisioned. As his familiar, it could tell exactly where Dallion was aiming at even. If there was nothing of significance there. A thin line appeared on the stone surface.

There and there! Dallion pointed, then looked over his shoulder.

There was no sight of his pursuers. Maybe they hadn't managed to jump onto the last cube? A bolt flying his direction told him that they didn't have to in order to be a threat. In a split second, the armadil shield extended, blocking the attack. At least that was something Dallion didn't have to worry about.

A bit faster, Nox. He redirected his attention to the crackling. Just claw the corner.

When the last inch of stone was clawed, the stone triangle shut up in the air, like a manhole under pressure. A fountain of emotions poured out joy, exuberance, euphoria. It was as if all the positive emotions were rushing to escape their stone prison. Dallion didn't hesitate. Without a word, he grabbed Nox and jumped into the hole. He could see the stream of emotions pass through him, yet they had no physical presence.

The drop went on and on. After a few seconds Dallion stopped using his music skill. The blinding stream of emotions disappeared, revealing a large, empty space. Torches light up all the walls, providing just enough light to see the outlines of the room.

Is this the center?

Dallion looked down. Almost instantly, he landed on what seemed to be a floor. In fact, it was a real floor unlike all the walls he had seen before, this one had furniture which was even hanging in the right direction. Normally this would be a good thing, however, the furniture wasn't from this world; it was from his parents' house back on Earth. There was the family couch—the thing was probably older than Dallion—covered in cushions, the old-fashioned chairs his father enjoyed, as well as an extremely old model TV with a PlayStation four plugged in.

Want to join in? a voice asked. Dallion saw a copy of himself sitting in front of the tv, gripping a wireless controller. It's boring when you play on your own.

The last time Dallion had seen anything from his Earth past was back after the first well challenge, right after he had made the guardian a promise. This seemed much more real, as real as an awakening realm could get.

Passing by the table, Dallion grabbed a free joystick and sat on the floor next to his other self.

Give it a moment, the other Dallion said. It takes a while to connect.

Dallion looked at the tv screen. The word loading was flashing on it in large green block letters.

Been a while since we last talked, the other him continued. Congrats on passing the second gate, by the way. Not that I had any doubts, but it's a big thing. You're pretty much joined the big player club. Not the majors yet, but still quite impressive for a stubborn plank of wood.

Hello, echo, Dallion said. I thought you vanished back in the previous trial.

I did, but also didn't. The echo laughed. As you've started to see, things are more complicated here. However, now that you've entered double digit territory you might finally start learning some things. Nothing useful yet, just a small fragment here, a small fragment there, until you are ready to learn more of the truth.

Will I ever be ready? Dallion frowned. He had heard that line way too often.

Why are you asking me? I know as much as you and you don't know jack.

A game flashed on the screen. It was a fighting game that Dallion hadn't seen before. The characters, though, resembled people he had seen in the real world. There was Gloria, Veil, Hannah, Hiroh, Eury, Vade, Falkner, the siblings, and even Arthurows. Aspion and his grandfather were also there, although none of them were selectable.

This is the trial? Dallion asked. I have to beat you in a game?

Sometimes a game is just a game. The echo selected Arthurows. Not that you'll beat me. I'm as good as you, remember? And unlike you I know exactly what you're thinking.

Dallion moved his thumbstick to select Falkner, but the character disappeared along with most of the rest. The only two that remained were Euryale and Vend.

Go with Eury, the echo suggested. She likes you. You never know what could happen. Besides, she knows how to forge.

Dallion hesitated. This was terribly convenient. Only recently he was wondering which of the two he should take as his mentor. Was both an option?

Music skills wont help you here, the echo said, reading Dallions thoughts. Vends not a bad choice either. He was mentored by March, so you know hes good. He definitely has a thing or two to teach you. Plus, youll have a much easier time rising up the ranks of the guild. You might even make captain, eventually.

It was a difficult question. Any way one looked at it, there were pros and cons, and neither was a guarantee of future success. However, this wasnt life, this was just a game, so Dallion quickly chose Euryale.

Oh? Thats surprising. The echo leaned forward. I was certain youd go for Vend. Guess I dont know you as well as you do.

Instead of the game starting, though. The TV screen went blank.

Technology, the echo sighed. What can you do about it? Am I right?

Dallion held onto the controller a while longer, then put it on the floor beside him.

Oh, well definitely fight, the echo said, sensing Dallions thoughts. Just not right this instant. You know, I was a bit hurt that you didnt make any instances of me all this time. A few of the others have.

Which ones? Dallion smirked. Arthurows? Falkner?

Pretty much all of them. Bel has a dozen, each protecting those piercings of hers. Youve noticed what theyre made of, so you know they are very different in the awakening realm.

Why are we even talking? Dallion stood up. You already know anything Ill do, and I know this is supposed to be a fight. This isnt home, its part of the cube. Is this supposed to give me second thoughts?

The echo smiled.

Were talking because you want us to.

There was a moment of silence, then all chaos broke out. Both came to the same conclusion, drawing identical weapons and swinging at each other. Harpsisword clashed with harpsisword, though only the strings of one of them vibrated. Unlike Dallion, there could only be one version of the sword. The same was probably true for the shield and anything else with an advanced guardian. Sadly, that didnt make Dallions opponent particularly weaker.

Green and red markers appeared, then disappeared. Dallion blinked. Before he could think about it more, the echo swung its harpsisword at him, forcing Dallion to jump back and block with his shield. Even as he did, though, there were no defense markers. Not that Dallion was particularly alarmed by the fact he felt he was strong enough to win without the need of assistance, but it was

still weird not having them there. It wasn't the case of him being too fast for the skills to keep up. It was just

Dallion jumped back. Something didn't feel right. Why was he so overconfident he could take the echo on without markers? He wasn't feeling that way upon first arriving here. Also, why hadn't he resorted to music?

The echo had a number of emotions in various parts of its body, but that wasn't the target Dallion wanted to focus on. Focusing, he looked down at his chest. The deep blue blob of overconfidence was there, vibrating slowly, almost as if it were pulsing.

You used music on me! Dallion shouted.

Of course. The echo drew a dartbow. You were thinking about it as well.

That's why he had told Dallion that music wouldn't help him. It wasn't a warning, it was planting the suggestion in him through the very same skill, so Dallion didn't find out what had been done to him. The echo must have also used the long conversation to inject overconfidence in Dallion, and possibly more emotions.

The bolt bounced off Dallion's shield.

I didn't lie about you wanting to talk, though, the echo said. As far as Dallion could see, there were no music qualities in his voice at present. You actually did, although you weren't sure what you wanted to talk about.

That wasn't true. Allion wanted no such thing. Just to prove the point, he played his harpsichord. A calming chord filled the air, affecting them both.

Smart move. The echo shot another bolt at Dallion, then jumped behind the television set. You're still wondering who the third person from Earth is. That's not your focus now, but you still want to find him, hoping he could help you somehow. Do you want to go back to Earth?

In truth, Dallion didn't. Things were starting to go his way here. He'd got his gear back, passed the trial, and most likely would pass his guild selection. What was the point in going to college after this? Although, maybe there were a few things he missed from Earth, like air conditioning, proper plumbing, and running water especially running water. It had been so long since Dallion had had a proper shower. Here he was forced to either wash from a bowl or bucket or use one of the lakes.

Throwing his harpsichord at the TV, Dallion drew his dartbow and sent a bolt in the direction of his enemy. To no one's surprise, the echo had already rolled safely away.

Only when you don't know how to counteract it, the echo replied. Besides, things will only get harder from here. It's the easy challenge. If you keep on delving into your realm, you'll find far tougher opponents.

I'll level up my skills.

And so will they.

Nox! Dallion shouted. Get him!

Chapter 152: Hidden Reward

The moment Nox jumped towards the echo, it was already too late. Dallions copy knew about the order instants before Dallion gave it, however, what he couldnt know was where the crackling would attack from. When the claws descended, the only thing the echo could do was try to block with his shield. The shield, being only a copy of Dallions, quickly broke, as the claws went on, slicing into the echos body.

In the past, that was enough to bring the echo out of existence. This time, though, a sharp pain pierced Dallions body, almost making him drop the harpsisword. There was a connection between him and the echo, and it was far stronger than that of any enemy so far.

Forgot to tell you. The echo jumped back. Its shield was completely destroyed, but he still had his dartbow. Im you as well. Defeating me will also defeat you.

That was beyond unfair. There was no way Dallion could win this one. At best he could hope for a draw that would consider the section cleared. If that happened, he would lose any additional prize the cube might hold. Maybe there was an alternative?

An interesting proposal, but Im not interested in a draw. The draw is continuing the status quo. Youll remain at your current level, a skill or two might improve, but nothing else. You still wont be able to pass the selection trial.

Then why dont you tell me what I need to do? Dallion shouted. He was becoming fed up with all this.

Tell you? If I did that, there would be no point in the trial. Didnt the glowing armor guy explain it to you? Youre responsible for your own improvement from here on, and to improve you must be able to break through your limits every time. If you cant win a battle against yourself, do you think you can win against anyone else? So far the only reason youve won was because your enemies were more successful in fighting against themselves than you were.

The sentence hung in the air, making time almost freeze for Dallion. His music skill showed the doubt that appeared within him. Had all his victories been due to opponents mistakes? True, he was the one who had taken advantage of them, but if that was all that he was doing, he would never win against a more capable fighter. That had to be the reason why all the double digits could handle him so easily. They had him outclassed and out-leveled, so much was obvious, but they also didnt provide him with any opportunities for attack. From here on he was going to have to make them himself.

Dallion dashed forward. With a twist and a whirl, the harpsisword was sent flying in the echos direction. Even at this distance the throw was too inaccurate to cause any damage, but provided enough of a distraction for Dallion to draw his dartbow and aim forward.

Once it evaded the flying weapon, the echo did the same. A standoff occurred dartbow against dartbow, each aimed at the opponents chest. Both pulled the trigger. Bolts dart forward.

Dallion moved his shield in front of his torso, sending the bolt bouncing off into the distance. Lacking that piece of gear, the echo swung his harpsisword to deflect the bolt in mid-air.

Nox! Dallion ordered, continuing on.

A single moment of hesitation passed through the echos brain. In that moment Dallions thoughts seemed to fracture in two. In one instance he continued forward, hitting the echo in the face with the shield. In the other, he shot the dartbow. There was no telling which of the attacks he would prefer; at the end of the day the chance was fifty-fifty.

The echo knew that Dallions final goal was to use the protective quality of the armadil shield to envelop and trap him. If that was the case, the optimal solution was to leap back out of reach. To his surprise Dallion, extended his right arm forward until his dartbow was no more than three feet from the echos, then squeezed the trigger.

From this distance, there was no time for evasion. Dallions music skills, combined with his newly-learned forging skills pinpointed a weak spot on the weapon. When the bolt hit it, the weapon shattered into fragments.

Well done, the echo whispered, knowing what would follow. Lucky charge. So lucky

As he said that, the dryad shield slammed into his chest, extending and enveloping him in a prison ball. It was a clever tourniquet and one that guaranteed victory without harming the echo too much. The last time Dallion had used this quality of the shield was to protect himself from soul suckers. Now he had found a new use effectively removing an enemy from the battle without killing him. Just as outside attack couldnt penetrate inside, nothing could leave the hold of the shield either. And just for good measure, the shield contracted so as to prevent the echo from moving an inch.

You really pulled it off. The muffled voice of the echo came from within the shield. Next time you wont be able to rely on luck.

Light streamed through the metal segments, then the echo was no more. Dallion took a few steps forward, slowly bent down and placed his hand on the shield. The object contracted to its usual form.

You have broken through your barrier.

Your level has increased to 11.

Choose the focus that will serve you best.

The green rectangle kept glowing above Dallion, but he was in no condition to do anything about it. Seconds passed, then minutes. Slowly, the headache loosened its grip. The pain that had kept him immobile on the ground went away, allowing him to push himself off the ground.

The rectangle remained there, waiting for him patiently when he got up. Once again there were five options given, and once again Dallion had to make a choice.

Quite a few of his attributes had made a jump since the completion of the second trial. The only possible explanation was that the level cap had blocked the effect of some achievements he had earned. At present Dallions body was at twelve, his perception was at eleven, and both mind and reaction were at ten. The mysterious stat remained at five of twenty.

Lifting his hand was painful, making Dallion feel the smashing of the rectangle. Finally, it was done.

Meow? the crackling poked him gently with its paw.

It wasnt luck, Dallion sighed. It went exactly the way I planned it.

That much I can give you. However, it was luck that let him fall for it. During your last attack, what did you do?

Dallion petted the crackling, then stood up. Right now, he didnt have the will or strength to conjure up an echo, but soon he would have to if he didnt want to be left behind.

I used the shield on him, Dallion replied. Thats it.

What about now? How do I find the prize?

Now, you search. The reward is somewhere within the paradox cube.

So, I must find a hidden chest in all this? Dallion looked up. Since his defeat, passageways and windows had appeared in the surrounding cube, displaying the sight outside. Everything was lit by the invisible light, causing all shadows to disappear like embers in the rain.

It doesnt have to be a chest, but yes. You dont have to find it, but I strongly recommend it. Such opportunities dont occur every day.

Yeah, yeah. Dallion waved his hand as if Nil were there before him. For all intents and purposes, he might well have been. Clearing the section had allowed him to see everything that was within and still he didnt offer any help. Thankfully, the echo wasnt the only entity in Dallions awakening realm. Nox. Dallion turned to the crackling. Think you can sniff it out?

The crackling extended its claws. Most likely that meant a yes.

Go ahead. If you find something, let me know, dont claw it up, okay?

With a purr, the creature dashed forward. Meanwhile, Dallion started his way to the outer surface of the cube surrounding him. There no longer were distorted echoes to impede his progress, although that didnt make his effort any less. Getting anywhere within this cube was a combination of luck and chance. Obvious paths lead nowhere, while dead ends turned quickly became shortcuts, as long as one knew which way the gravity was supposed to be.

Close to half an hour after defeating his guardian echo, Dallion had managed to find his way to the inner surface of the second cube. He also started to feel a sensation that he had forgotten about in quite a whilehunger. The battle, combined with the long amount of true time he had stayed here, made his stomach start to act up. Even the awakenedin fact, especially themhad to eat, and eating was impossible while in this realm.

Nox! Dallion shouted, looking into the distance. Found anything?

The echo of a hundred meows replied.

Nox, come here! He sat on the stone floor and waited.

Within a few minutes the crackling appeared, just as he knew it would. Climbing onto his shoulder, Nox meowed loudly, then leapt off and made several steps forward, stopping now and again to look back.

You actually found something? Dallion asked, surprised. Show me.

The let out an annoyed meow, as if saying what do you think Ive been doing so far? then led forward. The place he went ended up being further than Dallion expected. Twice he had to stop for a moment to get his bearings. Then, they would continue.

The spot the crackling took Dallion was a small stone bridge connecting two of the massive cubes. Dallion had no memory of being there before. Nonetheless he followed his familiar to the center of the bridge.

Here? he asked. The place didnt look special, other than the mark X clawed onto the side of the bridge. This wasnt something Dallion would use as a hiding place. Then again, he hadnt designed this illogical maze or maybe he had? The paradox cube was linked to his awakening realm, making it part of him. Here goes.

Dallion drew his harpsisword and shattered the side of the bridge. However, the action was not wasted. A silver glow emerged from the stone. The moment Nox sniffed at it, the glow vanished before Dallions eyes.

You have found the hidden reward and shall be rewarded.

Smash the window to see what gift the Seven have granted you.

Taking a deep breath he hit the blue rectangle with as much might he could muster. The rectangle burst into dust, then reassembled, forming another one.

Paradox Cube Reward

You have increased your ??? stat by 5

Chapter 153: Future Options

Five points on a stat were nothing to be laughed at. In absolute terms, that was the same number of points that one got for becoming a full awakened. However, after everything he had been through, Dallion felt the reward to be a total letdown. For one thing, it was in a stat he couldnt even use yet. To make things worse, it was starting to look like he wouldnt find out in the near future, anyway.

From what Nil had explained, an awakened had seven stages of development. Each stage was divided by a gate that acted as a level cap, requiring their own individual test. From there on things became complicated. Apparently, each gate doubled the number of levels required to reach it. The first gate was at level five, the next at ten, and the next which Dallion had to look forward to was at level twenty. In addition, there were two types of gates major and minor. All gates block attribute advancements, but major gates blocked skill increases as well. The gate at level ten had been a major gate, ensuring that Dallion could increase his skills up to level forty. However, it also guaranteed that Dallion couldnt reveal the hidden stat by level twenty-one. Dallion knew that, so he had decided to focus on his other attributes. This new reward messed up things just enough to make him regret his recent decision.

I got an attribute boost, Dallion said. Are you sure theres only one reward?

I was still hoping to gain the knowledge to craft something.

That was right. It had taken Dallion a while to figure out how to use music, and even now he was not an expert by far. Thinking about it, there were probably awakened that used it non-stop in everyday life. On several occasions Dallion had felt inclined to buy something off the street, just because he had found the stall seller to be charismatic. What if that was no accident, but an awakened was using music to attract customers?

Is it fine for me to leave now? Dallion asked.

Does that mean youve given up the idea of trying to become a master crafter in a day?

Leave the cube. Dallion sighed. In truth, he still very much wanted to try out his new skill, but the echos condescending attitude made him rethink his strategy. Maybe it was better to get some rest, not to mention he was feeling hungry again.

Yes, go ahead and leave the room.

You know what, I think Ill take a nap. Catch you later, Nil.

Dallion returned to the real world. After the recent experience, the inn room felt surprisingly small and organized. The floor was a floor, the walls were walls, and Dallion couldnt even reach the ceiling, let alone walk on it. Taking a deep breath, he tapped the hilt of the harpsisword.

That was something, wasnt it?

I still need to buy you from the general. After that, sure.

By the looks of it, that might be quite soon now that youve broken your cap. Just keep one thing in mind, though. Take it slow. Not worth getting messed up for three gold coins. If you need to pay off the general for another month or six, do it.

Another six months. That alone would cost a fortune, although considering the good the shield had done, it was well worth it. The greater problem was the selection test. There wasnt that long till

Dallion would have to enter the dagger alone. And from what he had seen so far, he was nowhere nearly as ready.

Does anyone have an idea which level I need to get to clear the dagger? Dallion asked.

All good advice. For the moment, though, Dallion had a more urgent concern: food. According to the arrangement he had with Hannah, he would have free room and board as long as he didn't abuse their arrangement. Leaving the gear in the room, Dallion made a quick check to see whether there was anything new in the guild. The thought of linking the emergency ring came to mind, but he decided against it for now.

Aspans food was as good as always. The cook even gave him a little extra to mark Dallion joining the ranks of the double digits. This was one of the weird things about Aspansomehow he always knew what was going on. Not too long after, Jiroh joined Dallion as well.

I'll be absent for a while, the fury said directly. Don't know how long it'll be this time. Are you okay to help out with the waiting while I'm gone?

Sure. Dallion smiled. After everything she had done for him, that was the least he could do. Hunting?

Sort of. Hunters do more things than just hunting. You'll find out some day.

You really think I'm set up to be a hunter?

The potentials there. I hope that you are, but only time will say. She took a sip from her cup. That's the thing about hunters. They are both born and made.

Ah. Dallion took a gulp from his cup as well. For some reason, seeing others drink tended to always make him thirsty. So, with a lot of effort anyone can become a hunter?

No, Jiroh said with a sad smile. Only those born to be a hunter can become one. However, not all born with the gift do. That's why hunters are so rare, and also why so few mess with us.

Dallion remained silent, continuing to eat his food. He was itching to finally find out once and for all whether she was an awakened or not, but knew that he wouldn't get a straight answer.

Don't discount your strength. Things might become tougher before they become better, but you'll get here. Also, you can rely on Eury to show you the ropes.

That much Dallion already knew.

Will she be joining you?

Yeah. This is bigger than our usual work, so there will be a lot of us.

And you still can't tell me what it is?

Always curious, eh? A gust of wind tapped Dallion on the back of the head. You'll find out at some point, but not today.

Right. Right.

You can go visit Eury before we leave, the fury added out of nowhere. We'll be heading out in the middle of the night, so it's okay to see her after the dinner shift. Think about it.

I will. Dallion nodded.

About Eury. Where did she come from? Dallion ignored the echo's suggestion. She's the only gorgon in Nerosal even if people have gotten used to her.

There aren't many furies either. But yes, you're right. She's quite unique, and that's something you should ask her.

The conversation continued a bit longer, but all the important things had already been said. As difficult as it was for Dallion to concentrate on the real world with everything the double-digit level of awakening offered, he did make a note to go see the gorgon after work. It wasn't like Jiroh to be so insistent on something.

Just as Dallion was finishing his meal, Nil let him know that there was an interesting job at the guild. Having a captain in his awakening realm turned out to be very beneficial in some ways; for instance, Dallion was aware of opportunities the moment they happened. Grabbing his gear from the room, Dallion then rushed to the guild. Upon arriving, however, it turned out that things weren't as he expected.

Dal, right on time! Estezol greeted him.

Hey. Dallion waved. On time for what?

I'm planning a dark exploration. Since there's no telling what it is, I'll need a lot of experienced packrats. Given what you've shown, I think you can handle yourself in a stressful situation.

I'd like to think so. What's a dark exploration?

If I knew it wouldn't be dark, the short man laughed. Special order. Some of the clients who use our services sometimes make this arrangement. All that we know is that a sphere item will arrive in three days, at which point it is to be cleared as quickly as possible. A rather large advance is paid for our troubles and for that we must be ready. That's why a lieutenant is taking this on personally. In most cases it turns out to be nothing, but every now and again we get a tough nut to crack.

That was an interesting arrangement. The fact that it paid better was already enough to get Dallion interested, and as a bonus he was going to see a lieutenant in action. There was no better opportunity to compare himself to someone experienced and learn a few tricks in the process.

Why not a captain?

Captains do it too, but that would cost a lot of money. And dont forget if something is so serious that a captain is needed, we wont be sending packrats.

Right. That made sense. So, what do I have to do? Get back in three days?

Well, theres that, but the lieutenant also needs to see if youre something hell want to take along. Its his mission, so he must feel comfortable with the team, and I dont mean only in terms of skill. I take it youre interested in the mission? It pays triple.

Definitely interested.

In that case, go to the second floor. The lieutenants going over potential candidates. Its easy to find, just follow the queue of people.

Given that the mission had only been officially scheduled twenty minutes ago, Dallion didnt expect to see too many people queueing for it. When he arrived on the second floor, he discovered that he had been somewhat wrong in his estimates. No less than three dozen people were there, waiting patiently. A few of them glanced at Dallion as he appeared.

Hey, Dal! Arthurows waved from the middle of the queue. Cool to have you join in.

You know me, Dallion replied. He was by no means surprised to find his slacker friend here. When it came to sniffing out opportunities, there wasnt a single person in the entire guild better than Arthurows. It was curious how the rest had managed to find out. Apparently, Dallion wasnt the only one to have echo help.

Just remember to keep it short and sweet, Arthurows shouted. Do that and youll be fine.

Got you!

Chapter 154: A Night to Remember

Interviews, interviews never change. Dallion never was particularly fond of them back on Earth, though he was never terrified of them either. All in all, he found them a waste of time. In nine out of ten cases, a persons mind was already made up, and it took great effort for the interviewee to change it one way or another.

Given the speed by which candidates entered and left the room, Dallion assumed that the test was in the awakened realm, and possibly involved a combat scenario. As it turned out, he was only half right.

Good luck, Arthurows whispered as he passed by, heading towards the staircase. There was no smile, no indication of how it went, not even any words of advice. Usually when someone reacted in such fashion, it meant that things hadnt gone well.

Thanks, Dallion shouted back. To be honest, he wasnt surprised at the result. While he had helped out a few times, Arthurows was a well-known slacker and not one to overtax himself when it came to anything. Still, it would have been nice if both he and Dallion had made it on the list.

When Dallions turn arrived, he ran his fingers through his hair, took a deep breath, and went in. The lieutenant was nothing like what he had imagined. Looking at him was like looking at a person so nondescript that it was the clothes that stood out. The man was in his middle age, with thinning grey

hair, though not bold, with a pale complexion, though not sickly, and with eyes that seemed to switch from amber to green every time Dallion looked at them. He was wearing an outfit that would have been better fit for roaming the Amazon than staying in the city, complete with a long-sleeved black leather jacket.

Name? the lieutenant asked in utter disinterest.

Dallion. Dallion Darude.

Dallion. Judging by the mans reaction that had caught his attention. The rookie that passed the selection trial, then threw it away trying to act like a big shot?

The way he said it didnt instill confidence. Dallion himself could have phrased it a lot better, but he had to concede the point.

Thats right. He decided to own it.

And you think youll be a good match for this job? The lieutenant leaned forward.

Packrats dont have to think, sir.

The joke had an effect, making the lieutenant crack a smile. That was a good sign. All that Dallion had to do now was not lose the momentum.

That harpsisword. The lieutenant pointed. Can you actually use it, or are you carrying it just for show?

I can use it to an extent. Dallion drew the weapon from the sheath on his back. Want me to demonstrate?

No, no need. The man waved his hand. Any experience in exploration jobs?

A bit. Ive been Janna and Kallans pack rat for the last few weeks.

Right. Well, thats all. Thanks.

Done already? That was surprising. Dallion had expected at least a test of some sort.

Well, thank you, sir. He made a step towards the door. So did I pass? He asked just to confirm it for his own sake.

No, Dal, you did not pass. Not in the least.

The response caught Dallion off guard, almost making him walk into the wall. He had failed? Why? He hadnt even done anything wrong. The questions were so generic that Was it the joke that had messed things up?

I need packrats for this job, not rookies who want to use it as an excuse to score points in front of the rest, the lieutenant continued. Yes, Im fully aware of all your exploits. Chosen by March, did a few good exploration runs, helped find a few lost. Frankly, the only reason I gave you a chance was because you had the common sense to actually save those poor souls, and not go slashing like a shardifly. I gave you a chance, and you wasted it.

There was no point in arguing with that. Dallion nodded with a polite smile and opened the door.

A piece of advice, the lieutenant said. Youre already in the guild. If you want it further than you are now either stop showing off or prove that you can make it.

That was a bit harsh. Did Dallion act in such a way? All this time he thought that he had kept on the low-low, while also doing everything in his power to improve his skills and gear. He didnt expect to be complimented for reaching double digits in a few monthsalthough it would have been nice if someone acknowledged itbut he didnt expect to be chastised like this for no reason either.

I thought you told me this would be a good opportunity, Dallion whispered.

I wasnt sure hed be the one to pick it up. There is more than one lieutenant, just so you know.

For some reason Dallion was getting the impression that the echo was lying. There wasnt anything he could base it on, just a feeling resonating in his awakening realm. If he had to guess, the echo believed the lieutenant was going to like him. How wrong could one get?

Still, go ask Estezol for a training sword. Technically, you cant use it now, but I have it on good authority that an exception would be made as long as you ask. After all

Thanks, Nil, Dallion interrupted. Maybe some other time.

The afternoon was particularly beautiful when Dallion went outside. There was just the right number of clouds to keep the sun from scorching down on the people below. The dryad shield had often mentioned that in the imperial capital there were a branch of mages whose sole task was to make sure that the weather was to the emperors choosing. In the grand scale of things, Nerosal wasnt as important to have a mage present, but was blessed with wonderful weather most of the year, nonetheless.

Passing by the Gremlins Timepiece to leave his gear, Dallion then spent several hours walking through the city with no clear goal. Carefree, yet also mindful of where he was going, he visited a few artisan districts, the entertainers street, and even one of the citys fishing lakes. There were so many things to behold, so many that he hadnt noticed before, constantly focusing on leveling up. It was as if hed gone on a trip abroad only to spend the entire time sleeping at a hotel. The Nil and the rest of the entities linked to him felt likely agreed with the notion, for none of them said a thing the entire time he was out. Even the shield kept silent.

Thanks, all, he whispered. I appreciate today.

There was no answer, which made Dallion appreciate the moment even more. However, eventually all things had to come to an end. Taking a few more minutes, Dallion returned to the inn for his evening shift.

Jiroh wasn't there, as she had warned she wouldn't be, which made Hannah volunteer Dallion to help with serving customers again. In his present state, though, Dallion couldn't be happier. Serving and mending with the same flair he had when first arriving at the inn, he managed to earn himself over a gold coin, and increase his music skills by two as a result. The items he had to improve were also sweet: a locket and an engagement ring. Dallion was even tempted to improve each more than once, but knowing Hannah's policy, he decided not to put anyone in an awkward position.

You're different today, Hannah mentioned as he was having his dinner. What happened?

Lots of things, Dallion replied with a smile. And on your end?

The usual, the woman said with even greater suspicion. Dealing with preparations for the grand event. You sure you're alright? You didn't have some guardian smack you on the head or something?

No, I'm fine. It's just that I realized something. Dallion took a gulp from his glass. Always take the time to enjoy life and take advantage of opportunities offered. There's no telling what the future might hold.

You're a bit young to be thinking like that. But hey, it's not like you listen to me for anything. A smile appeared on her face. Go ahead, get lost. I'll clean up here.

Oh? What about the

I said get lost. Or do you want to miss this opportunity?

Dallion laughed. Hannah had the rare ability to be grumbly, even when being nice.

Thanks, he said. I'll go out a bit. No idea when I'll be back.

Don't do anything crazy, you hear?

Dallion had no intention to. Walking through safe neighborhoods, and keeping a constant eye out for trouble, he made his way to Euryales workshop. When he got there, there was still light coming from the inside. That was a relief she hadn't set off yet. Interestingly enough, the statues outside the building were much less than last time.

Eury, Dallion said loudly, then knocked on the door. A few moments later, he opened it and went inside. Eury?

The workshop was mostly empty. Business must have been booming lately, for a lot of the fabric had gone, along with most clothes and all the armor pieces. It was as if Dallion had walked in a store during the last few days of a clearance sale.

Give me a moment, Dal, the gorgon's voice came from the neighboring room. I'll be right there.

Sure thing. Dallion sat on what could pass as a workbench. Jiroh told me you'll be going on a job tonight, so I thought I'd pass by.

Tomorrow morning, Euryale corrected. She's the scout of the group, so she heads out early. The rest of us will join her before sunrise.

That was good to know, though not a terribly interesting topic of conversation. At least, not right now.

I thought you'd be the scout, Dallion kept the conversation going while waiting. Because of the perception and all.

You're cute, but for a hunter speed is more important to a scout than perception. There was a distinct sound of snapping, followed by a slight metallic rattle. Nearly done.

Dallion didn't have to guess that the gorgon was working. Anyone who had gone in and out of awakening realms on a regular basis knew the tell-tell signs: untypical pauses, slight change of intonation, and the momentary transformation of items from one state to another. Ordinary people didn't see it, but for an experience awakened, every improvement sounded like a pop-corn kernel opening up.

Several seconds later the gorgon appeared wearing her typical loose robe, carrying an arm of armor. Dallion couldn't recognize the material, although it seemed to have the appearance of bronze.

Last minute preparations, Eury put the armor piece on one of the free racks. The price of being a threat-forger. A third of her snakes didn't leave Dallion the entire time.

Some of your statues are gone. Sold off?

Broken. The gorgon moved away from the rack. And you really shouldn't sit there. It's not meant to hold heavy stuff.

Dallion looked down, then carefully got off the workbench. At least he hadn't broken anything. Not that breaking meant a lot to an awakened. If he'd wanted to, he could have mended or even improved the item between two blinks of an eye.

I'll be sure to go on a diet. He joked, then remained silent for a few moments. By the way

Can I ask you something? Euryale interrupted. This was rather unusual. Since he'd known her, she wasn't one to do so, at least not in this fashion. Dallion nodded. Are you seeing anyone?

The question came somewhat as a surprise. It wasn't totally unexpected. Almost every time the two had been together, they'd flirted in one way or another, the gorgon especially. Dallion didn't expect her to beat him to the question, though. And thanks to his music skills, he could tell that she was being very serious.

Not at the moment, he replied. You?

I'm a gorgon, she replied, as if that explained everything. A lot of things are different for us. I know with humans you are usually expected to make the first move, but it's just not me to wait.

Still somewhat at a lack of words, Dallion nodded. He had toyed with the idea of asking her out ever since she had done the same to him, but even so, he never thought anything would come of it. Was this just a casual fling? Or were things going to become serious? Dallion had no idea, but at this point all he knew was that he wanted to find out.

Here. Euryale gave Dallion a small gold ringlet.

What's this? Dallion looked at it closely.

An awakening blocker. It's aimed to provide you some privacy if you're interested.

Without hesitation, Dallion slid the ring on his left pinky finger.

Wheres yours? He looked back at her.

Chapter 155: The Captain's Parcel

Dawn had long passed when Dallion woke up. The night had turned out much better than anything Dallion had experienced since coming to this world, even if it was unexpected. Even with all the weirdness going on, hooking up with a gorgon was way out there.

The first thing Dallion saw upon opening his eyes was a note of paper on Eurys pillow, pressed down by a heavy metal key. Curious, Dallion stretched, then took the note.

Didnt have the heart to wake you.

Lock up and keep the key. Ill come visit once the job is over.

Smooches,

E

The briefness of the note combined with the perfect handwriting made Dallion smile. The gorgon was definitely a straight to the point girl, though in a charming way. Even so, he didnt know exactly how to feel about getting a key to her shop. Was this an invitation for him to move in? Or did she just want him to lock up while she was gone? For the moment he decided to consider it the latter.

With another stretch and a long yawn, Dallion got up from the bed and looked around. Unlike his room at the inn, the workshop had a proper bathroom, making it possible for him to get something close to a shower. To make things better, Euryale had left two full buckets of water for him to pour in the ceramic sprinkler. There was no toilet, of course, no doubt that was in another part of the building. Still, Dallion decided to enjoy what he could.

The shower was invigorating, if slightly cold. After a thorough rinse, Dallion brushed off the water with the fresh towel left for him, then got dressed. Judging by the sun, eight oclock was approaching, which meant there was breakfast at the inn waiting for him. Even so, Dallion spent a while to find where to fill the buckets with water again. It was only proper to have them ready for Eury upon her return. Tidying the place up a bit, he then locked up and went back to the inn.

A few steps before the door, Dallion stopped. With a sigh, he removed the limiter ring from his finger and stepped inside.

About time, Hannah greeted him in typical fashion. Your food was about to get cold.

Yeah. Dallion nodded, then silently went to eat. At this point he was starting to feel a slight urge to go to the toilet, but did his best to ignore it. All he needed to do was focus on silently finishing his food.

I take it you spent the night well? the innkeeper asked.

The question made Dallion feel uneasy. Could it be that she somehow knew what had happened? That was unlikely. Dallion didnt remember mentioning hed go to Eury. In truth, he himself hadnt been certain he would until that evening. More likely, Hannah was just concerned that he had spent the night outside.

Yeah, it was pretty fine, he replied with a smile. Did anything happen while I was gone?

A lot of things and none of them your business. I got a celebration request for tonight, so you better be in shape.

Oh, definitely. Dallion felt relieved. She didnt know, she just was worried about her business. Talking about close calls. Anything special Ill be doing?

Lots of mending, for one thing. Ive told them that the improvement limit is three per night, but knowing the crowd they might want to go for a few extra. Will you be up for that?

Up to six is fine. Now that Dallion had gone past his level cap, improvements were a positive thing again. He could earn some money once more, leveling up in the process.

Okay. Will you be going to the guild today?

I think so, Dallion replied on instinct.

Good. I have something for you to give to captain Adzorg. Hanna disappeared into the kitchen. Fifteen excruciatingly long seconds later, she reappeared with a small cube item wrapped in light blue cloth. I want you to give this to him in person. Alright?

What if he isnt there? Dallion asked.

If hes not there you get someone to tell him to get there. He must receive the package this morning. Think you can manage that?

Sure. Give me just a minute. Dallion stood up and finally went to relieve himself. Washing his hands, he then went back out. Whats the package? He took the item. It felt lighter than he expected.

A gift from a common friend, Hannah said, then deliberately paused. Actually, he forgot something when he came to visit you. I only found it when I was cleaning recently. Well, Aspan found it.

There was no way to tell whether she was telling the truth or not. Dallion could only nod and leave for the guild. This was the first time since his arrival in Nerosal that he had spent a full day outside of his room. For some reason, it felt strange, almost unnatural. He suspected that his gear would understand, although maybe it was a good idea to avoid the subject for a while.

I guess relations are complicated everywhere.

It was almost nine by the time he arrived at the Icepicker guild. Quite a lot of guild members had already arrived, queuing to get a job from the lobby managers. Dallion managed to catch a glance of Bel and Falkner, each waiting patiently in line. Once he had delivered the parcel, he was going to join them, and possibly get some mission pointers. With luck, maybe one of them would take him as their packrat for the day.

Hey, junior, a familiar voice said nearby. Where do you think youre going?

Dallion turned to his right. As expected, Spike was there, leaning against the wall. A few fresh bruises decorated his face. The man had without a doubt spent a rough night fighting somewhere. Dallion could only hope that the mirror pool wasn't involved in this.

I must give something to captain Adzorg, Dallion replied calmly. All the time he kept repeating to himself not to ask about Spike's face, so that was exactly what he did. Did you fight the mirror again?

The skinny man looked at him with a silent, serious expression for several seconds, then laughed.

Nah, don't worry about it. Just a minor disagreement. You can't even call it a fight. It finished pretty fast.

Even if all that was true, Spike completely missed the point. For someone to be able to hurt him at all, they had to be stronger than a guild elite. Or maybe they were just that? Dallion had heard on several occasions that a lot of guilds didn't like each other. The only thing that kept them from starting an all-out war against each other was the city guard.

Seriously, it's fine. You said you wanted to see the old geezer?

Yep. Assuming Adzorg was the old geezer in question.

He's down below, playing dice as usual. Just make sure he isn't having a winning streak before you interrupt. The man's superstitious as a cat.

Interesting comparison.

Thanks. See you around, Spike, Dallion waved, then rushed to the staircase.

It had been a while before he'd gone to the training rooms. To no one's surprise they hadn't changed at all since that day: rows of shelves with strange objects, and no one else but the same four people gambling. The difference was that this time all of them were Dallion's superiors in the guild, so he couldn't be as casual as he had been back then.

Adzorg seemed in pretty good humor. From what Dallion could see, he was winning, which meant that he wasn't to approach him. At this point a person would normally just quietly remain, observing the game until a good moment to interrupt. Spending so much time with Nil, however, had made Dallion accustomed to the captain to the point he didn't feel threatened or intimidated by him in the least.

Morning, sir, he said loudly, almost making Adzorg spill his pile of earnings. Sorry for the bother, but I have something for you from Hannah.

A moment of anger flashed through the old man. Upon hearing the name, however, it quickly subsided, replaced by eagerness.

Bring it here, the captain said.

When Dallion did so, he took the parcel and carefully unfolded the cloth to reveal a small wooden box. Within the box, on a cushion of purple velvet, lay a single segment of white metal. Neither the design nor the material was something Dallion had seen before. The closest thing it reminded him of was a decorative letter opener, although it was definitely too small for that. The material, though, was obviously a special metal.

Thank you. Adzorg slapped the box shut. Thank Hannah for finding it for me.

No prob. What is it, though?

The old man glared at him.

Err sir? Dallion smiled. I think Ill be going to check for a job.

No one said a word as Dallion left the training room, making the experience even more awkward than he would have liked. That was one of the problems with old people of authority, Dallion had noticed. Back on Earth, all the older teachers reacted this way when they wanted someone to leave.

Thank you? Dallion whispered as he climbed back up to the first floor. Why for?

Do you think my original would have been as calm if he didnt know you had an echo of his?

Good point. Saved by an echo. Who would have thought that

Mister Darude, the captains voice came from behind. He wasnt shouting, but thanks to Dallions improved perception, he could hear it clear as day. Would you mind returning for a moment?

Traitor, Dallion hissed beneath his breath. There was no way the echo hadnt known this. Instead, Nil had deliberately lied to him just to create this effect. Awakened and their echoes could really be scary when they wished.

The atmosphere had changed a lot when Dallion returned to the training room. Everyone was serious, and all traces of gambling had been swiftly removed.

Tell me, what is your opinion of the guild so far? the captain asked.

Its okay. Dallion did his best not to shrug. Experience had taught him the closer to neutral he could be, the better.

Any highlights you could share? Or complaints you want me to address?

Err, no, nothing I could think of Dallion paused. This probably was one of those trick questions. Clearly he had to mention something, just nothing that could be interpreted in various ways. The after job celebration feasts are great.

Adzorg looked at him for a long while.

I would hope so. They are a basic requirement for any guild. I trust you have informed yourself on the effects the awakened state has on the body?

Yes, sir, I have read quite a number of tomes on that.

While this wasnt exactly a lie, Dallion had no intention of clarifying that hed read probably the first few pages in depth before flipping through the rest. The problems of good eating had never been something he concerned himself with, even back before he had improved his body.

And you find the pay adequate?

Do you enjoy being a packrat?

Its okay

Dallion, Im not here to listen to polite excuses. Guilds function on the deeds of their members, not the words. You can avoid the subject all you want, but that wont be of any use. If things are bad sooner or later, youll either leave on your own, or well kick you out. And all that because you didnt voice your personal thoughts when you were given the chance.

Seriously, I like it here a lot but yes, I want to move on from being a packrat.

There you go. The captain smiled. It wasnt so difficult and as youve undoubtedly noticed, you are still alive.

I also dont think Im ready to move on from being a packrat. Not yet.

Oh? Youre still set on demonstrating you could pass the dagger trial alone?

I made the request, I might as well go through with it.

Just because youre a late bloomer, dont expect youll be able to achieve miracles right away. However, thats between you and Vend. I just want to know, do you think youll need any help?

Dallion looked straight into the mans eyes.

Yes, and Ive already received it.

Chapter 156: The Quiet Noble

It had been less than a day, in real time, since Dallion had been on a guild mission. Back on Earth that would be considered barely any time at all. After all, how much could change in a day? Barring something going viral or another major unexpected event, everything but the peoples clothes remained the same. Here, he could say no such thing. In the span of a day or four in true time Dallion had entered double digit territory, leveled up twice, acquired a new skill, linked several awakened realms to his own, solved a paradox cube, been rejected for a job, made several life-altering decisions, and not to forget he had hooked up with Euryale. After all that, going back to being a packrat felt like going to the kiddie pool after spending a week in the ocean.

The sphere item that he was assigned to was a mere level two. The partythree guild members that Dallion barely knew did an okay job dispatching all the enemies, although they werent as good as the siblings that Dallion usually got teamed up with. Remaining behind he observed their performance mentally noting all the missed opportunities: delayed attacks, blocks where they should have been thrusts, picking a stronger target while killing a weaker one would be possible. It was as if the second trial had removed a veil from Dallions face letting him see things much better.

Without a doubt the party was skilled, possibly more skilled than Dallion in his current state, yet the level cap combined with their reliance on enemy mistakes made it look as if they were performing martial art katas instead of fighting. This was especially noticeable during their combat against the level guardians. The team relied on tried-and-true tactics, some of which Dallion had started to

recognize, slowly grinding the enemy down to defeat. If Dallion were fighting and received proper support, he thought he could take them down five times as fast. That, however, wasnt his job yet. For the moment, his task was only to carry their weapons.

After the second level was cleared, and the items destiny was fulfilled, Dallion received an increase in his guard skills. From what he could gather since he hadnt done anything much the entire time, it was his initial skill that had been bumped up. That was good to knowhe didnt have to specifically invest in it anytime soon.

And after the job was over, came the time for the obligatory feast. The food was just as much, the crowd just as loud, and Dallion felt that for once he wasnt the center of attention.

That was one tough fight. Bel slumped in a chair next to him. Didnt think a colossus could put up such a fight.

Oh? Dallion smiled. Fighting colossi brought back memories. It was the first guardian he had faced, as well as the last guardian before becoming a full awakened. What did it do?

Does breaking me in two count?

Dallion looked at her in disbelief. Logic told him that couldnt be true, yet curiosity made him look down at her waist, just in case.

Well, it didnt do that, but it tried pretty damned hard to! Bel took a pitcher of water and poured herself a mug. That was one of the weird quirks she had. After a difficult mission, she would always drink water and in large quantities.

What about the rest of the party? Didnt they help out?

Heh, she replied, which was code for they didnt do a thing.

Told you you should have taken me as your packrat.

Dont think I didnt try. Falkner did too, and both of us got turned down because you took your sweet time in the training room.

There was that. The short conversation with captain Adzorg had turned into a long conversation and then into an even longer conversation coupled with a training exercise in a training item. It was almost scary how much the man resembled his echo. The old man had made Dallion go through a lot of the basic skill sequences, as well as a few advanced. It was fortunate that Dallion had managed to get most of them correct. On the other hand, he didnt even want to remember how many of the theoretical questions he had gotten wrong it felt too much like high-school again.

How did Falkner do? Dallion quickly changed the subject.

Hes still at it, Bel shrugged. Got a triple mission job. Dont know why he keeps taking them. He doesnt need the money, and its not like he can improve any of his skills anymore.

Maybe he just likes exploring?

Actually, Dallion knew exactly what Falkner was doing. It had nothing to do with skill or money, or even experience; the boy was building up courage to pass through the second awakening trial. It remained strange why he should. After all, the trial was just the realization that one had to push his limits and of course that hed become a target for other double-digits, whatever that meant. After one mugging and one attempt, Dallion had a pretty good idea what that might be like, so he hadnt

hesitated much. Maybe it was the age difference? Some things seemed a lot scarier when Dallion had been a teen. Then again, a whole lot more things seemed a lot easier back then as well.

Ive no idea what hes doing. I dont even know why he ever came to the guild in the first place.

He told me it was because of March.

Heh. Bel snorted. Is that what he told you?

A few moments later Grunt appeared with a large platter of food, bringing the conversation to a pause. As usual, he had brought Dallions favorites and a few other plates that could be assumed to be Bels. He didnt say a word, nor did he remain longer than a few seconds.

Thanks, Grunt. Dallion said, as the giant walked away. Yes, thats what he said, he then turned back to Bel. I doubt hes the only one.

Well, Bel moved closer, whispering so faintly that air barely left her lips. Hes lying. March is a big thing for the likes of you and me, but for him, shes just a third-rate guard.

Nah, really? Dallion found that hard to believe.

Do you know who his family is?

Some nobles from what I know.

Some nobles that have ruled over a city twice the size of Nerosal for generations. One of his uncles is the city-lord. If he wanted to train under an expert, that person would be taken to Falkners estate from the other side of the empire. Some of his relatives live in the Imperial capital, and Im not talking about the outer sections. When youre someone like that you dont apply to a guild, you just tell them you want to join.

That was outright impressive. Dallion had long suspected that Falkners family was more important than he liked to make them out, but he had no idea that they were this important. Taking this into consideration, Bel was rightthere was no reason for him to join, and yet in the few instances Dallion had used his music skills, he had seen that Falkners admiration of March was genuine. The boy honestly wanted to get trained by the captain, though for what purpose one could only guess.

Maybe he just wants to live a little?

I hope not, Bel sighed. When nobles try to live like commoners, things dont usually end well.

From that point on the conversation quickly devolved into jokes and combat strategies. It seemed that sooner or later all awakened conversations took that turn. Strategies, on the other hand, made Dallion think of Euryale; she too had taught Dallion a thing or two. The thought made Dallions pulse quicken slightly.

Dal? Bel asked after a while. You okay? You seem out of it.

Yeah, sorry. Was thinking about something. Dallion finished the last bite on his plate.

Important.

Sort of, he semi lied. Theres a big celebration at the inn where I work. Innkeeper told me to be fresh, ready, and on time for that one.

Sounds important.

As long as it pays well, Im fine with that. Thanks for the chat, Bel. Dallion stood up. Say hi to Falkner if youre still here.

Will do. Take care, Dal.

Wow. Thats the advice you want to give me? Dallion had to admit, though, that a warning coming from the echo had him slightly concerned. Plus, its not like Ill do anything bad to him. Were pals.

When dealing with nobles, that works against you. The fact that you have a lot of potential might make some people more lenient, but not all. Please keep that in mind.

If you say so.

Furthermore, at the risk of sounding like that shield, I would advise against flirting with guild members.

Wow. Whats gotten into you today, Nil? You really dont sound like yourself.

Just an observation. Think nothing of it.

As he walked by the fruit stalls on his way home, Dallion used his music skill to see which of the apples to take. Since the skill could be used on objects as well as people, he could tell which of them were in the best condition. Not only that, but there were things such as happy apples and sad apples. Thankfully, as Nil had told him long ago, food didnt have guardianstheir emotional state was a memory of the entity of origin. Happy orchards produced happy apples. While looking, Dallion happened to see something unexpected.

How much for that? he pointed at an amber rock in a flowerpot.

This? the stall owner asked, surprised. Its a decoration I picked up from a merchant. Why?

Is it for sale? Without thinking Dallion resorted to using his music skills while talking. It was only a minor influence, not even targeting to anyone in particular, but his words resonated, spreading the desire for a deal.

Everythings for sale as long as the price is right. The woman smiled. For you, since youve become a regular, two gold.

The price was rather high. For something that was just a decoration it cost five times as much as it should have. That wasnt an issue since Dallion had the means to lower the price quite a bit. All he had to do was haggle a bit. However, one thought stopped him.

Here. He took out the amount from his pouch and handed it to the stall owner, who, by the looks of it, was astonished that he had agreed. Looking at her emotions, she had only said such a high number to have a better advantage at haggling. Now that he had accepted, though, she felt guilty about it.

Thank you but you must have a few apples with that, the woman quickly added. A gift for the sale. Its alright. Dallion took the pot. Ill pick them up some other time.

No, Dallion whispered as he walked away from the stall. But I knew I had to.

And just what will you do with a rock? Upgrade it until it becomes valuable?

Its not a rock. Thanks to his music sense he could see beneath the shell into the things true form, and that form was very different from what one might expect. Its a plant.

Chapter 157: Forging Skills

It was astonishing to find that there was something Nil didnt know about. Dallion never thought he would see the day, but here he was despite all of the echos knowledge and the thousands upon thousands of scrolls and tomes in the ring library, there was nothing that identified the rock plant that had been found at the market.

Initially, Nil thought Dallion to be mistaken or goofing around, but after a few demonstrationst thanks to Dallions music skillshe couldnt deny it any longer. The rock, for lack of a better word, had roots of emotion that went into the soil of the flowerpot, and not only any emotion; if there was a constant vibration of helplessness, making people want to guard and protect it. That was why the stall owner had set such a high priceshe didnt want to sell it, though not to the extent of outright saying so. The high price was an internal compromise meant to discourage Dallion. When it hadnt worked, the woman had snapped out of it, seeing how unreasonable it was.

If it were, can you identify it? Dallion whispered through gritted teeth.

What should I tell her?

Bringing a rock in a flowerpot is certain to raise questions.

You think shell kick me out?

Nothing in particular happened when Dallion got back to the inn. Hannah half involved in a shouting match about the evenings menu to pay attention to him. It was always impressive when someone was able to stand up to the innkeeper, dishing out insults like a fisherman. The argument appeared to be the usual quality versus price. Aspan, as always, that he could not work in such

conditions and would rather serve nothing at all than something subpar. He would likely lose, of course. Dallion had witnessed a few arguments between the cook and Hannah, and each time Hannah would have the last word, although after a considerable compromise.

Rushing to his room, Dallion barred the door and put the rock plant on the ground.

Dallion opened his mouth to counter what had been said, but soon enough closed it without saying a word. There was no comeback after such a greeting. At this point, whatever he said would be bad. Still, he was going to investigate who had spread the word about last night's events.

Thanks, he mumbled, to prevent further awkwardness.

You know what this is? Dallion asked.

Actually, people were clueless about it, Dallion said, stressing on the clueless part. Some thought it was a decoration. If it wasn't for my music skills, I would have missed it completely.

Come to think of it, he had passed by the stall every day and not noticed it even once. Was it by chance that he hadn't noticed before, or was it passing the second trial that had allowed him to spot it? More than likely it had to do with the trial, or at the very least the level cap.

You really are a lucky kid. First a gorgon, now this. Not that this could compare to her. Back in the day, it used to be a gorgon import. I think it still is. I've only seen it grow in the wild once. Everywhere else, it's like you have it here. It's said that it withers to dust when its owner dies. I have my doubts. The one I was given cracked to bits pretty fast and as you can see, I'm alive and well.

You're a companion shield Dallion noted. In his mind, that didn't count entirely as alive. The more interesting part was that some of the shields' previous owners had given him gifts. Technically, there was nothing to be surprised at. Dallion had friends back at high school, who bought gifts to their action figures, and those weren't even able to talk back. What does it do?

Yeah. Dallion crossed his arms. I can't believe it either.

How do I take care of it?

You're a dryad shield! Dallion thought. On the other hand, it wasn't like Dallion knew much about them, either. Maybe singing wasn't such a bad idea. The orchid clearly thrived on emotions, maybe they could nourish it like water nourished normal plants? At worst, Dallion could do nothing and rest assured that the rock wasn't going to die.

Seven hours remained until the evening's celebration. Even lunchtime wasn't close. Unless he was going to spend the time staring at a rock, there were a few other things Dallion wanted to do, and the thing he wanted to try out the most wasn't going to take him more than a second even if it would likely leave him exhausted. Lying on the floor, Dallion closed his eyes.

Personal Awakening

The room appeared around him. While still of stone, it was definitely much more refined than before. The stones on the floor had changed into a mosaic, and the walls had the appearance of smooth concrete. Taking a few seconds to admire the improvements, Dallion then went to the new wall that had appeared.

All his forging skills were here, illustrated by a metal anvil placed in a small alcove in the center. Unlike all his other skills, forging didn't automatically grant the first tool, but required a two-stage learning process. Each separate forging skill Dallion mastered would form a separate hammer to be put on the wall, along with other instruments linked to some specialized activities. All the crafting skills were the same.

Meow? Nox rushed at Dallion.

Hey, Nox, Dallion petted the crackling on the head. You're feeling eager today?

He's always feeling eager. Nil entered the room as well. Like every familiar he needs exercises which you aren't providing. There's only so much he could do in here.

You aren't getting much hunting, are you, Nox? Dallion asked, scratching the crackling behind the ear. Don't worry, I'll change that soon. There already was something in the works. Once that happened, Nox would have all the freedom he could wish. Just have a little more patience, okay?

For the slightest of moments, Dallion thought he saw the crackling squint at him.

Meanwhile, you can play with Nil.

The last had some effect. The crackling purred, then rushed next to the echo. Dallion noticed that it didn't try to climb upon him. Nox was smart enough to know that doing so risked destroying Nil. It seemed that he, too, had become far smarter than he had been before.

Being granted enough space, Dallion took hold of the anvil and moved it to a free spot in the room.

FORGING skills activation.

Choose the focus of the skill.

That was the first step. Now all that Dallion had to do was choose a material so that the hammer would gain form. From what he had read, tin and iron were the usual choices. They were abundant in the real world, allowing him to start working right away. It was no wonder why most awakened chose them as a first pick, allowing them to earn additional money while getting the hand of the skill. It was only after that they would pick one of the awakened metals to start improving their gear. In general, it was a good plan, but as a gamer, Dallion saw what others couldn't the possible exploit.

A block of glistening silver appeared on the anvil. In the real world, the material was next to impossible to mold. Dallion's strength had to be in the twenties, not to mention the forging skill required was thirty or above, according to the skill scrolls. However, in the awakened realms, all materials were much more malleable, and the first one selected came for completely free.

Interesting choice. The echo mused.

Instead of an answer, Dallion grabbed hold of the cube. Silver markers appeared on areas of its surface, marking areas to press. Using his hands, Dallion followed the instructions. The moment he exerted a bit of pressure, the metal bent as if it were made of plasticine. That was metal shaping the innate skill of the dwarves to form metal using hands alone. The tomes described it as one of the most valuable military skills, responsible for huge advancements in weapons and ingenuity. Unfortunately, the dwarves squandered that gift if the historical records in the library were to be believed on wars between each other and thus were quickly replaced by humans who became the dominant race of the world. At present, the dwarves only existed in small scattered dukedoms beyond the borders of the empire.

Silver markers appeared and disappeared, guiding Dallion along the way. In a way it felt like folding an origami made of metal. Shapes formed and changed on and on until finally a hammer was born.

FORGING skills activated.

Follow the suggested markers for best efficiency.

The weight of the tool was measured perfectly. The final shape was very different from any hammer he had seen. The only way he could describe it was: a pyramid on a stick. The face was large and completely flat, narrowing to a perfectly sharp point on the other end. Even after reading some scrolls on the subject, Dallion remained quite confused. No doubt there had to be some handling skill involved. There was no way he could adequately form anything using this. Then again, that's what markers were for.

An ingot of sky silver appeared on the anvil. Moments later a vast number of markers appeared, surrounding it like the instructions on an IKEA manual. Dallion blinked. Did all this go into the forging of a single simple item? As far as he could determine there were over a hundred markers, indicating hammer position, strike strength at least he hoped the arrows were an indicator for

strength and impact zone. On numerous occasions Dallion could tell that the markers were stacked one over another, though his current perception stat prevented him from seeing all the layers.

For several seconds Dallion kept staring at the ingot, trying to find a point for him to start from, even if it was a few strikes. In the end, he lowered the hammer. As he did, the ingot disappeared as well.

Not as easy as one might assume, is it? Nil asked.

Nope, it isn't. Dallion let go of the hammer. Instantly the tool appeared on the Forging wall within its own frame.

That's why people usually start with iron.

I guess, I just must get stronger a lot faster. Dallion smiled.

Chapter 158: Flameforge Celebration

Dallion made a dozen more attempts to construct his first item between lunch and dinner. He'd spend hours reading through instructions, following what passed as best practices, only to find out he couldn't make heads or tails of the markers. There was one thing on which tomes, scrolls, and Nil could agree upon: it was always recommended that novices started with tin or iron, if tin wasn't as available in the local real-life area and gradually work their way up to more advanced metals. Having his first hammer be for one of the most complicated metals in existence was accompanied with an impossibly steep learning curve. Just in comparison, making a dagger out of metal included five steps and a total of twenty-three actions.

An encouraging melody echoed in Dallion's head.

Don't worry, Harp, he said, lying on his bed. It's fine. I was half expecting this.

To be exact, Dallion knew he'd have problems, but hoped he'd be able to wiggle himself out of them. As it turned out, the only option he now had was to learn a secondary material in real life. In the short term, that was slightly more difficult; he'd have to gain knowledge and experience as a non-awakened person, potentially needing months to grasp the basics. However, there was no doubt he'd have required years to learn sky silver smithing. In the end, despite the hiccup, it still was a better investment or so Dallion believed.

Normally having a big event meant big pay and potentially large tips. However, right now he couldn't wait for it to be over with so he could toy some more with forging. One of the magnificent things of forging in his awakened realm was that there was no penalty for mistake.

I'll be heading to work, Dallion said for the shields' benefit. It was starting to sound as if he was living with a roommate that didn't have a cellphone. Keep an eye on the orchid for me?

Downstairs everything was ready to accommodate the expected crowd. Hannah had rearranged a few tables, moving them close to one another so as to create the equivalent of a giant one. A few more were added near the corners, mostly for aesthetic purposes.

Dal, youre here, the innkeeper said the moment she saw him. Help me with the food.

Sure. Dallion went to the kitchen. A host of large platters filled with food were already prepped, waiting for him. Thats a lot of food, he said, grabbing two of them. How many people are there?

Thats for starters, Hannah replied, carrying one. Aspan will make more as in the course of the evening. Im hoping it wont be longer than four hours.

More? Are we expecting a pack of wolves?

Awakened, Hannah grunted. Which is pretty much the same.

Awakened are coming here? Dallion found the notion mildly surprising. From his experience for the most part they would gather to eat at their guildhall. In fact, several guild members he knew ate exclusively there. When asked, they had mentioned that the food in their usual place wasnt good enough once they leveled up. Dallion had been extremely fortunate in that respect, but for the most part, inns simply couldnt afford cooks that made dishes for an awakened palate.

They are celebrating. Hannah placed the platter on one of the grouped tables. Following her example, Dallion did the same. Its not that unusual. Thats the plus in having a good cook. You get a lot of customers from the guilds. The Icepickers buy a lot of food from here. Jiroh takes it there, when she isnt busy. Maybe I should find someone else to do deliveries as well.

I can help, Dallion offered on his way back to the kitchen.

Youre an awakened. You cant do deliveries. Besides, I cant afford you.

Im not asking to be paid, Dallion laughed. I go there every day for work, its no problem for me to No. Lets just leave it at that.

The concept came as no surprise, though Dallion didnt expect it to be observed to such a degree. Possibly it had to do with the awakened's perception. Being surrounded by sewer smells at his level of perception was truly a terrifying thought. On the other hand, Dallion was halfway to comparing himself to an ant when it came to listing things. Not that he had tested it, but doing handstands proved so effortless now that Dallion didnt even consider it special.

One by one, all the platters were moved to the tables. Once that was done, jugs of water and ale followed. There was no wine; Hannah had no intention of awakened getting drunk in her inn. A few scented candles were added a special request made by the clients then the waiting began. Dallion couldn't help but feel curious as to who would arrive and what the occasion would be. For better or worse, he didnt have to wait long.

The first person arrived almost at seven. From her looks, it was obvious that she was an organizer. Dressed in the medieval version of a business suit, the woman gave Hannah a quick nod, then went to check the arrangements.

That didnt sound good, but in the present circumstances Dallion thought it better not to ask for details.

Thats just the starter, the innkeeper explained. We can keep the food going for a while. Aspan can handle the quality, but speed might be an issue.

Not a problem, the woman said. Her voice was unusually sharp. There wont be a lot of them, so this should be enough.

I trust there will be no alcohol this time? The innkeeper narrowed her eyes.

If there is, theyll fix everything broken.

No need. I have an awakened as well now. Hannah turned to Dallion. Dallion, this is Fire Sky, captain of the Flameforge guild.

Flameforge? The name rang a bell. It was considered to be one of the top five guilds in Nerosal. Dallion had looked into it after his mugging. According to Nil, the five guilds were skill, respected, and annoyingly arrogant. They also had multiple guildhalls throughout the city. Just five months ago, due to a series of successful large jobs, they had increased their influence, rising to number three of the top five.

A pleasure, captain. Dallion bowed slightly.

Dallion? Fire arched a brow. I heard mention of you. You were Marchs pick, right?

She conducted my entry test, yes. It had been five seconds since Dallion had met Fire Sky, and already he disliked the woman. She was one of those snobs that made it a point to prove how inferior everyone else was. Using his music skills of observation, it came to no surprise that she considered Dallion to be even more insignificant than he thought she would.

Good. Take care of the small things. If anything, major is damaged Ill have the people involved step in. And well pay for everything broken, of course.

The last sounded unpleasant. Dallion was proud not to have had anything completely broken in about a week. For an awakened to say the phrase so casually meant that she didnt care overly about the item guardians.

Of course. Dallion kept on smiling. Anything else youd like me to help with?

Hell be serving, Hannah quickly said. Just the food. Your pack is old enough to pour their own drinks, I hope?

Thats arguable.

Interesting enough, that comment made Dallion dislike the woman slightly less. It wasnt that she had a low opinion of him, but rather that she regarded most people beneath her. Knowing Earth corporate culture, this probably was the way to rise in a large guild. It also made Dallion far more thankful not to be in such an environment.

As more of the Flameforge guild members arrived, Dallions notion was only strengthened. For the most part they were about his age, overconfident, and arrogant befitting a major guild. They also appeared to be rather fond of brawls and fighting. While waiting, Nil had filled Dallion in, that the Flameforge guild was a military guild, which meant they were used for two main things: mercenary activities and weapon improvement. Weapon improvement was pretty much what one would expect, although mercenary activities had a slightly ominous ring to it.

Hey, rookie! someone yelled at Dallion. Bring some more food, will you?

Sure. Dallion sighed mentally and went to the kitchen. Aspan had been working wonders, so there were a few more platters ready. Dallion grabbed one, even if there was plenty of food in the main hall, and brought it to the table.

This all? the Flameforge guildmember asked. He was a head taller than Dallion, with massive arms and, so far, a pretty rotten attitude.

I can bring more when the food starts finishing. Dallion kept his cool. Big job, I take it?

An inner urge made him try to get somewhat friendly, and that turned out to be a serious mistake. The other man smirked, as if waiting for an excuse, then crossed his arms in a clear display of dominance.

All our jobs are big. Were one of the top three guilds in the city, so we get called when theres trouble to deal with. And Im not talking about sanitation jobs. Were the people who get sent out when others cant handle stuff.

What about your guild? I hear that you take whatever scraps you can find. Thank the Seven that March showed up to save you. The guild was a dump before that. No one wanted to have anything to do with you. Now only most dont. The man laughed at his own joke. It was at this point that Dallion had had enough.

Actually, Ive been exclusively on exploration missions.

Yeah, right! I bet youre some low-level packrat that hasnt even passed his selection trial.

The insult was oddly specific. The person wasnt just being annoying, he was specifically looking for a fight. Given his approach, it was easy to avoid any confrontation, but the question was, should Dallion let him do so. Pausing for a few moments, he looked at Hannah. Remaining perfectly silent, the woman shook her head.

Didnt quite hear that, Flameforge guildie said.

Yep, youre right. Im just a packrat. Dallion stepped away. Let me know if theres anything else I can bring you.

Hey! A large hand was slammed on Dallions shoulder. I wasnt finished talking to you.

What else is there to say? Dallion turned around briskly. Self-control was one thing, but he wouldnt stand for being humiliated in such fashion. Need someone to carry you during your jobs?

You carry me? The other laughed. Id like to see that.

Mord, thats enough, Fire Sky warned, although her tone suggested she wasnt overly concerned or bothered with what was going on. If anything, she was letting him know that any damages to the inn would be paid from his pocket.

I think someone just issued a challenge, Captain, Mord shouted so that the few people who werent paying attention would start doing so. Its not against the rules to accept, right?

Hes just a kid, Mord. Let him be.

With due respect, I think thats for him to decide. The man then turned back to Dallion. So, rookie, what will it be? Run with your tail between your legs or confirm the challenge. Both work for me. Ill just laugh more when you run away.

In that case I confirm the challenge. Dallion could see through the others shallow plans, but this was an opportunity he didnt intend to miss. So. What now?

Chapter 159: Challenge and Offer

Prep the room, " Fire Sky said in an icy tone.

The moment she did, it was as if a switch was flipped. The Flameforge guild members stopped whatever they were doing and in nearly perfect unison broke up the food area into its composing tables. Each table was put against a wall, leaving the center of the room empty.

Therell be no fighting here, Hannah said, although she sounded less insistent than one would expect.

Ill pay for the event and all related damages, the captain said firmly. Theres no backing out of a challenge.

I wouldnt want to, Dallion said loudly.

Curiosity vibrated in almost all the opposing guild members, mixed with the occasional spot of pity or enthusiasm. Hannah, strangely enough, was calm through and through, even looking forward to what was about to happen. The only person who rang with hatred was Mord.

Dallion didnt respond. Even so, he thought he would be fine. While his opponent was larger, he seemed way overconfident for his own good. Furthermore, the sword he carriedwhile flawlesswas made of common materials. There was no way he could take it in any awakened realm. The weapon was made exclusively for the real world, suggesting he was closer to someone like Veil. If that were the case, there was a good possibility that he had holes in his development. As long as Dallion didnt get overconfident himself, things should be fine.

Know the rules, rookie? Mord asked.

What are they? Dallion crossed his arms. The cockier he made himself appear, the better. In this case, though, it was also true that he wasnt fully aware of the proper duel etiquette. He had heard

that there were rules concerning scuffles between guilds, but as a very junior member, neither he nor anyone else in the Icepicker guild had considered it likely that he'd have to resort to them.

You issued the challenge, so Mord gets to choose the weapon.

That sounded pretty much what Dallion expected.

And the location?

Everyone stared at him. Several people didn't even hide their mocking chuckles.

This room is the location, Fire Sky said after a few seconds. It is discouraged that awakened common duels are held in the realms. That is reserved only for the nobility.

Blades, Mord said with a smirk as he drew his weapon.

Can I borrow a blade? Dallion turned towards Fire. Mine are in the awakened world.

Typical packrat, Mord snorted, only to get a warning sign from his captain. Despite being from his guild, she wasn't going to allow an unfair fight.

Everyone here can offer you one, but you'll have to pick it yourself, the captain said.

That sounds fair.

Dallion already had an idea of what he was looking for. Of the four-dozen people, about ten were equipped with proper swords. Of them, three or four seemed adequate to Dallion's needs. Moving closer, Dallion focused on his music skill, trying to get a sense of the guardians within. On the third sword he found what he was looking for: a guardian reveling in destruction and bloodlust. Taking one look at the sword's owner, Dallion could understand where that was coming from.

Can I? he asked, pointing at the sword.

The Flameforge guild member frowned, and reluctantly handed him the weapon, hilt first.

Thanks.

The sword was quite heavy for its size, possibly fifteen pounds. Being awakened, that didn't present any problem, though. Dallion squeezed the grip, then moved the sword around. It felt much different from the weapons he was used to. The testing swings felt heavy and sluggish.

Do you really want to choose that? Fire Sky arched a brow.

It's his head, let him choose what he wants, Hannah said in her usual tone of voice. Of course, you'll pay for any treatment of injuries.

Of course.

What does Harp think? Dallion attempted his best awakened whisper.

Shes annoyed that shes not there. Personally, Im glad that she isnt. The nymph has far too much bloodlust for anyones good.

That was to be expected, she was a battle gear, after all. Still, for the moment Dallion would have to do with the piece of chaos he was holding. After doing a few more slashes in the air, he lowered his sword and went to face his opponent.

City rules, full contact, Fire Sky said. Dont pull any punches. Ill take action if anyone is in real danger. The duel ends if someone surrenders, drops his sword, or I determine its over.

Understood, Dallion said.

Get to it.

Barely had the word been spoken when Mord charged forward with a piercing attack. The speed was substantial. Based on Dallions estimate, his body had to be at level fifteen at least. The reactions werent bad either, though felt just a tad slower than Dallions. Following one of the well-known guard sequences, Dallion twisted to his right, evading the attack. At this point it was normal to expect a follow-up attack, but one didnt come until well over a second later.

Youre not playing around, are you? Dallion said, using his music skill as he spoke. The goal was to inject fatigue, causing his opponent to become even slower. Plan on fixing this afterwards?

Instead of an answer, one of the other guild members placed his hand on the wall, then removed it. The hole had gone, along with a few other imperfections that had been on the wall for years. At least they were keeping their word to repair all the damages.

A new series of attacks followed, these one much faster and better organized than before a double slash followed by a spin and a vertical slice. It seemed that Dallion wasnt the only one testing his opponent.

After another arc attack, Dallion decided it was time to counter. After a double feint, he thrust the sword forward. The bloodlust radiated from the blade, giving Dallion a slight headache.

Unfortunately, the attack was far too slow and imprecise to have an effect. Mord parried it without effort, following up with a slash of his own.

That was close, Dallion said, trying to increase Mords overconfidence. Fatigue clearly was having no effect on the man. Maybe we should just call it a draw? Well just be going at each other all night. None of us can win.

Shut up! Mord did a double spin, scarring a nearby table. Ill win against a worm like you!

Apparently, his music attack was having an effect. Either that or Mord was a bigger jerk than Dallion initially thought.

In his mind, two versions of Dallion performed each action, and each received a corresponding response. To Dallions surprise, Mord froze. Without reason, he took a guard stance, holding the sword in front of him with both hands. The opportunity was too good to miss. If there was a time to attack, it was to be now. Instead of attacking directly, though, Dallion decided to try something out. A few days ago, he would have gone with the optimal strategy of those he had learned, or tried to improvise an attack on the spot. Now he was going to do something else create an entirely new opportunity.

It was a gamble to combine skills in such a way, especially in the real world, where markers couldnt exist. And still, something told him to strike Mords blade three inches from the hilt. Logically, it made no sense. Even so, Dallion had decided to trust his instinct.

The blade split the air. After his momentary hesitation, Mord adjusted to block the attack with his blade. Before contact was achieved, though, Fire Sky appeared between the two of them in the blink of the eye. Dallion watched her blur into two instances of herself one stopping Mord from attacking, the second preventing Dallion from continuing his attack. When the blurred images merged back into one, Fire was standing there, holding each blade with one hand.

The challenge is over, she said. Put the place back to what it was and get back to your food.

The order made little sense. No one had any idea what had happened or who had won. By the looks of it, though, no one wanted to argue. Dallion felt his hands letting go of the sword on their own. A few steps away, Mord did pretty much the same.

There will be no further challenges tonight, the captain said. That goes both ways.

Yes, captain. Mord looked away. Thanks to his active music skill, Dallion could see that the Flameforge guild member was full of rage and disappointment. In his mind he believed to have lost the fight, even if no such thing had happened. Probably he regarded the captain intervening as an instance of defeat. You got lucky this time, rookie. Next time things will be different.

Whatever you say. Dallion smiled. Im always here. That was another good thing about the music skillsthey showed when someone was bluffing.

Had Dallion heard right? Had Nil complimented him? This was definitely worth celebrating if Dallion didnt have serving duties to perform. Apparently, the only prize for victory was the ability to serve customers in relative peace. Considering how volatile things could have turned out, Dallion decided that was reward enough.

The event continued pretty much as expected. After fifteen minutes the incident appeared to have been forgotten and everyone from the Flameforge guild was back to eating, drinking, and discussing recent experiences in the awakened world. In many ways, this was no different from the practice in Dallions own guild. From what he could gather, the group had helped with the improvement of a sky silver weapon. Details remained unclear, but it was a major enterprise involving over a hundred guild members. It was considered an undeniable feat that paid pretty well. The senior guild members had gone to celebrate in one of the fully awakened taverns, while the packrat equivalents had reserved a night at the Gremlins Timepiece.

Hey, rookie! Mord shouted as Dallion was passing by. Whats your name?

The man looked drunk, which was an achievement since the only alcohol was weak ale. Apparently, there were people who couldnt hold their spirits in the least.

Dallion.

Dallion! Mord put his arm around Dallions shoulders. You know, youre not so bad. All those things they say about you he waved his other hand in front of him not true. Not true at all!

Thanks. Dallion gingerly removed the mans hand and placed him in the nearest chair. Thankfully, Mord didnt protest. Good to know.

Roughly an hour later, and two hours after the deadline Hannah had set, the party atmosphere had seriously died down. Those who werent drunk were bored, and those who werent bored were improving what little damage there was left. Dallion had offered to help, of course, but each time he did, someone had already mended the thing in question.

Dont pay notice, Fire Sky said. Its not personal, just part of our guild credo: never ask help for something you can finish by yourself.

Thank you, maam. Ill keep it in mind.

Youre a strange one, you know. You cant be more than a starting double digit, but you already have the ability to split. Who taught you? I know it wasnt March. Its not her style.

Captain Adzorg has been teaching me theory, Dallion replied, unsure what the question was.

So, you really dont know. The woman sighed. Outright scary. No wonder people are keeping an eye on you. It wont be enough, though. For now, youre hidden, but sooner or later youll start to shine, and theres nothing the awakened in this city hates more than a light they dont control. Keep that in mind and consider whether you want to switch guilds.

Dallion blinked. Had he heard right? Had the woman just tried to recruit him?

This isnt a one time offer, so take your time and think it over. When youre ready to join one of the five, just visit one of our guildhalls. Ill make sure theres an emblem ready for you.

Chapter 160: Four Percent

Cleaning up the main inn hall after Flameforges celebration was the easiest job Dallion had done in this world. The guild captain had made everyone mend everything in sight under the pretense that it was part of their training. More likely, she was displeased that a member of her guild had lost a duel and wanted to teach everyone else a lesson. That was alright with Dallion, especially since his hunch had proven to be true skills could be combined in interesting ways. Now, more than ever, he was relieved that he had managed to get his forging skills.

That's one solid door, Dallion thought, looking at it with his awakened skills. As it turned out, music and forging allowed him to see the structure which included structural weaknesses of most metal objects. Dallion had used the same trick to find some pans and pots that needed mending in while serving food during the night. He had ventured into their realms to confirm his suspicion and found it to be correct. The pots appeared perfectly fine on the outside, but their labyrinths revealed a few hidden flaws. Mending had felt satisfying, although didn't grant him any achievements or skill increases. For that he would have to rely on missions and standard item improvements again.

I know. It was bound to happen sooner or later. After a week it won't matter, anyway. After a week and change, Dallion was going to have his individual selection test. Succeed or fail, everyone was going to talk about it, just like they had after his fight with March. This way I know there's no turning back.

An extreme method of training, although it has its benefits. Personally, I still think that you need to spend more time reading. You're starting to get a good base, but it's still shaky. You won't be able to rely on your ingenuity forever.

Maybe.

While Dallion agreed, in his mind there remained a voice whispering that it was all about the stats. In his brief experience as an awakened, Dallion had faced a fair number of enemies. In most cases, the reason he had won was because his opponents were evenly matched. If Dhermas village chief hadn't been limited by the armor echo, there was no way Dallion could have won against him. If he hadn't received the dartbow, he might not have defeated the Sandstorm Dragon. Did it really make such a big difference that he was a double digit now? Vend and Eury could take him out without breaking a sweat, not to mention common furies got the better of him.

What level is considered a good level? he asked.

At what point do I stop being one of the weak ones?

You've already stopped being a weak one. You know the hierarchy: semi, full, double digit. Most people don't want to hear that, but about three quarters of all awakened end up here. Unless you have access to a large awakening shrine, getting to level twenty is a feat that requires persistence, dedication, and destroying all impurities within you.

Impurities. Dallion let out a chuckle.

Its a scientific term. Sounds better than cracks.

Okay, though I would have used flaws.

I see your point. That made Dallion feel a bit better. So, Ive reached the average threshold?

If you want to be pedantic, the average range is between thirteen and seventeen. Most people cant progress after that. You will, though.

Here it came again. Dallion was getting tired of hearing of his mythical potential. Initially, he had hoped that the echo would reveal some grand secret after Dallion had reached level eleven. Nothing of the sort had happened. The mystical potential was nothing more than a gut feeling the high levels had based on their experience. Personally, Dallion suspected that it had more to do with his creativity and ingenuity in battle.

So, one quarter are better

Who told you a stupid thing like that? The vast majority of that quarter is composed of awakened that havent passed their awakening trials. Youve grown up in a village, you know what its like. In many of these small places, a person is considered special if they get to level five. Why do you think so many flock to the cities? And even after that, there are a lot who prefer to remain at single digit and take advantage of the security. All the minor craftsmen, apprentices and assistants especially, prefer to lead a quiet life and make do with the skills they have. If you want to go by the numbers, Id say four in a hundred reach the next awakening gate.

Four percent. That wasnt much at all. That explained why Dallions grandfather had jumped at the opportunity to join the army. If Aspions memories were to be believed, all volunteers had been offered free access to an awakening shrine. If it was a level twenty shrine, that means that a person had the potential to become stronger than ninety-six percent of the awakened out there. Quite tempting, indeed.

I guess so. Dallion turned to the side. Night, Nil. Night, all.

Shut up, shield, Dallion whispered with a smile. Had he become so transparent? He liked to think not, although he kept on thinking about Eury. At one point the thinking passed into dreaming.

Dallion could see himself in the wilderness again. He was riding a wagon to somewhere. He had no idea where, just that it was very important he arrived on time.

Nice gear, Fatun said. The merchant hadn't changed from the last time Dallion had seen him. Only this time, the wagon was full of weapons and ammunition.

Thanks. My girlfriend made it for me.

The other man whistled, impressed.

I know, I'm a lucky guy. Dallion laughed. I just hope I reach her on time.

I'm going the best I could, Fatun grumbled. It's bad enough we took this shortcut. The death rate along here is thirty percent.

It'll be fine. Dallion tapped the hilt of his harpsword.

I'm counting on that. What's the good in earning a huge profit if I'm not there to enjoy it?

I hear you.

So far, they had been extremely lucky. There hadn't been a single star spawn creature the entire trip. If things continued like this, they would be at their destination in half a day, safe and sound. And then Dallion would finally see Euryale again.

Keep on driving. I'll check the cargo.

Right. I'll yell if something pops up.

Carefully, Dallion moved to the back of the wagon. Wooden crates were everywhere, each with a mark of a waxing blue moon. Dallion opened one. Rows of orange crossbow bolts lined the crates. They looked normal to the naked eye, yet Dallion knew that they weren't just bolts—they were rockets.

The dream ended abruptly. The next thing he knew, Dallion was back in his bed, and it was already morning. The first thing he did was to enter his guild ring to check for missions. To his surprise, a number of jobs had come up during the night, all relating to sphere items. Apparently, a client had come with a sackful during the night and wanted all of them explored and leveled up. The timing was perfect for Dallion, who needed as many opportunities as possible to level up.

In less than a minute he was washed, dressed, and ready to go.

Hannah was also up to no one's surprise. Last night she had made a killing, earning well more than expected. Of course, a lot of the profits had immediately gone for food supplies. A large part of the rest had gone to Aspan, who had also demanded a day off—not that Dallion had ever seen him leave the kitchen, let alone the inn.

I'm skipping breakfast, Dallion said as he ran past. See you at noon.

And remember to be on time for once! Hannah shouted behind him. Despite her rough voice, Dallion saw that she was happy for him.

Twenty minutes later, another standard day at the guild began. The job he had been assigned was a four-level artifact that looked like an abacus. Dallion had no idea why anyone would want something like that improved, but at the end of the day that wasn't his concern. The item belonged to the client. What they did with it and their money was entirely their decision. All the guild was responsible for was fulfilling its destiny.

The siblings were also assigned to him on this mission. Both were happy to see him and proceeded to dump all their weapons on him the moment they entered the awakened realm. Dallion didnt mind much. As he had seen, success in such missions was shared, so it didnt matter who did the final kill.

Watching the Janna and Kallan fight remained a pleasure. Although Dallion had gotten to know the repertoire quite well, their execution remained flawless. Also, his present level of perception allowed him to notice things he couldnt before. There was a certain rhythm they were following with precision gained through decades of practice. Another interesting thing was that they always focused on the weak spots.

That made them extremely efficient against creatures they had faced, and also explained the hesitancy when they came upon something unknown.

After the third guardian, Dallion asked if he could pitch in. Neither of the siblings had any problems, as long as it was only when fighting the guardian. It was an extremely nice gesture, especially after the lieutenants attitude towards Dallion during the big dark exploration interview. Also, it showed Dallion how much he had improved. While forging didnt grant him any advantage, the ability to combine skills freely, along with Noxs constant support, allowed Dallion to dispatch a level four guardian almost on his own. The performance was impressive, to the point that the siblings asked him to try and fight the final guardian on his own. They would be there only for support if needed.

The guardian, funny enough, turned out to be a firebird. And thanks to Dallions expertise it took less than a minute to defeat. In typical style, though, Dallion didnt use combat to achieve the win, but slowly chipped away at the guardians desire to fight until it agreed to surrender. Lately this was starting to become the preferred outcome for Dallion. He couldnt explain it, but there was something satisfying in knowing that a guardian just agreed to not fight. It remained unclear if that changed anything in the grand scheme of things. Even Nil wasnt sure on that subject, but there was definitely less pain involved. At the same time using music to achieve victory was just as difficult as using standard attacks especially when Dallion had to resort to singing and playing the harpsisword at the same time a feat he wasnt eager to repeat anytime soon, since it had brought back the headaches he hadnt experienced since the selection trial.