

Leveling up 171

Chapter 171: Combat Splitting

Shield! Dallion shouted, leaping back.

The piece of gear extended to the size of a semi-sphere right on time to protect his left side from the flow of daggers flying his way. Even so, two of them managed to twirl past the edges, causing two moderate wounds.

So far, the fight wasn't going at all well. While the firebird acted as a constant source of health, healing Dallion every five seconds, Arthurows attacks had intensified to the point that they were draining more of his life.

Initially, the Star had attempted to rely on massive single damage attacks. That had nearly worked, leaving Dallion at a third health for several instances, but thanks to the shield's ability he always had the option to cocoon himself until he was fully restored. The attempts to corrupt the shield had also ended without result, so Arthurows had resorted to the next best thing: constant, gradual drain. That meant he took on the firebird's methods, slamming Dallion into the wall while hidden within his shield, and launching daggers when he went out of it.

Harp! Dallion charged forward, the harpsiswords strong vibrating with pain as he performed a horizontal slash.

As before, Dallion leaped back, evading the attack with ease, while keeping an eye for Nox attacks. Ironically, it was the crackling that had exclusively dealt damage so far. No matter what Dallion tried, all his attacks would be parried, blocked, or evaded one way or another. Nox, on the other hand, seemed to remain invisible to the Star's senses. As long as Arthurows didn't see it, the crackling would almost certainly make its hit. This time was no exception.

Emerging on Dallion's knee, it propelled itself forward, slashing Arthurows' knuckles, then disappearing again. One more hit another five percent less. That made the Star at sixty health still far from enough.

This is getting boring, Arthurows said, looking at his hand. We both know you'll lose. Why not accept it?

Darude! Dallion yelled, dashing forward. This time there was a longer exchange of blows. Too close to the chambers wall, Arthurows didn't have the option to evade, so he summoned two bucklers with which to block and deflect the harpsisword.

You seriously need to pick a better war cry. Techno songs just don't cut it.

Normal attacks didn't work at all. Surprise attacks were worthless. Even split thinking didn't seem to do a thing. In contrast, defending against Arthurows was getting more and more difficult. Even if he couldn't create five theoretical instances of himself, Dallion rarely managed to do anything about it.

Thanks to his shield, he'd often block three of the five vectors of attack, even four, but unless he blocked all five, it didn't matter.

Euryale had told him that everything in the awakening realm was a concept. It wasn't him really here, nor were the weapons actual weapons. It was all thoughts given form. So, what if the same thing applied for attacks as well? If the markers were the embodiment of reactions based on a skill, there was nothing stopping him from using them in different ways. How, though?

Im trying to, Dallion hissed beneath his breath, as he kept on swinging a sword at shield at Arthurows, in an attempt to do anything.

That's one certain way to get skewered.

You don't have to stop to think about everything. Just stop thinking about feints, counterattacks, and consequences. Just imagine attacking many times at once.

Arthurows summoned a spear and thrust it at an unprotected section of Dallion's chest. Dallion's adrenaline kicked in and he saw two outcomes in his mind. In one he was pierced by the tip of the spear, effectively losing two-thirds of his remaining health. In another, he leapt to the side.

It's a dumb question.

No, it's the only question that matters. As long as you're fighting without making a choice you'll always lose. After all, if you don't make a choice, someone else will make it for you.

I chose not to get hit, of course!

In an instant, Dallion saw both outcomes occur in real time. One of him was pierced and the other one wasn't. Moments later, he found himself looking at the spear pass by, as the other instance beside him writhed in pain only to disappear as an afterimage.

Had he just avoided the attack? Apparently so, but how? Just by choosing the obvious outcome?

That was true. The dagger was supposed to limit all opponents, lowering them to Dallion's level. If there was something Arthurows could do, there was no reason for Dallion not to be able as well.

Harp, can you do the same? he asked.

Dont worry, Ill take care of that.

Another series of spear attacks came Dallions way. This time, Arthurows had only chosen to go for three alternatives, likely still keeping an eye out for Nox. At this point, Dallion tested the new theory. Instead of evaluating how best to block all three attacks, in his mind, he blocked each of them individually. Moments later, when the attack was over and two of the imaginary options had vanished it turned out that he had blocked the attack successfully.

Part of him refused to believe what had just happened. If this was the proper way to fight, it was far too easy, almost as if it were a cheat. On the other hand, wasnt this the definition of breakthroughs coming to a realization that made something impossible seem elementary? No wonder it took the naturally awakened years to increase in level. They had to earn this knowledge on their own through endless training and reflection. The awakened shrines and items condensed that in a single moment of intensity, forcing a person against opponents whose purpose was to illustrate the required method for their defeat.

Ironic that the Star had taken on that role. Even so, the battle was far from won.

Another attack immediately followed. This time, Arthurows went all out again. The result was roughly the same. This time, though, one of Dallions defenses was not as good as the rest, earning him another minor wound. Naturally, that was the one that occurred in reality.

How about you surrender? Dallion asked, spreading confusion with his voice. Youre limited by the dagger, and now that Ive learned your trick you wont be able to mass damage me as before.

Without hesitation, he went on the offensive. In his mind, he attacked in five different ways. Also in his mind, Arthurows reacted to each of the attacks. Five clashes, five options to choose from. After some hesitation, Dallion chose the instance in which he pushed his opponent back. That way he could try to get Arthurows back against the wall, limiting his maneuverability.

The effort was successful. Not only that, but Nox also joined in, dealing the obligatory minor wound to the Star. It was interesting that Dallion wasnt able to see the crackling in his predictions, either. As far as the awakened realm was concerned, the puma cub didnt exist.

Even if you win here, you wont win much. Arthurows counterattacked. Youll just delay me a bit. Youre not vital, just a nuisance.

The spear dropped to the ground, replaced by a sword in each of Arthurows hands. The attacks were more intricate now, requiring Dallion to focus more on them. In half of the potential cases, he saw himself losing ten percent health, in one even fifteen. However, the latter was what Dallion went for. Despite him suffering the greatest amount of damage, in that case he also managed to deal damage of his own.

MEDIUM STRIKE

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has decreased by 15%

Seeing the red rectangles, Dallion smiles. Finally, he had joined in the fight, and along with Nox managed to reduce the Stars health total to forty percent.

You know, it was really stupid to fight me in an awakened item, Dallion pressed on with his music skills. Now that he was starting to have the upper hand, he had the intention of taking advantage of every opportunity. Probably the worst place you could have done this.

Your music skills really suck, you know, Arthurows replied, although streaks of hatred and anger were pulsing throughout his emotional void, like cracks in an egg. I did this specifically to give you a chance.

The lie was quite convincing, but Dallion could see it wasn't true. Bubbles of deceit had briefly emerged from the emotional cracks.

And not only you. Did you ever wonder why I didn't attack any of your friends? the Star asked. I could easily have done so, you know. Accidents happen, after all. A single moment of sloppiness and Falkner could have ended up with a missing limb. Or maybe your gorgon could find herself in trouble with the city guard. They can be quite stubborn, you know. Especially when gorgons are concerned. The smile on Arthurow's face grew as he summoned a chain and ball with which he attacked. Or that lovely inn you're living in. Imagine it all in flames, killing the few people that helped you out. That could still happen, you know. I can easily make life miserable for everyone you've ever met in this city. Even the general. Even March.

The threat was most likely empty, but it still managed to hit its mark. For a split second, Dallion pictures everyone he knew in the city getting hurt. The star had already demonstrated that he was capable of that; he had transformed people into chainlings before and could likely do it again. However, instead of filling Dallion with fear, it had the opposite effect. Maybe it was because of the adrenaline pumping through him, or maybe because he was tired of it all, a strong note of determination resonated throughout Dallion's awakening realm. The firebird on his shoulder grew to double its size, healing him at twice the speed it did before. When Nox leaped into the chamber, he too now had the appearance of a full-grown puma, claws the size of small knives. Even the harpsisword appeared to glow in a fine blue light.

We got you now, Dallion said, and attacked.

This time, instead of the five attack instances in his mind, there were six. Arthurows managed to counter five of them with ease, but the sixth remained completely unblocked. In it Dallion saw himself slashing diagonally through the Star's body, dealing a critical wound to the entity. All Nox had to do was follow up from there, and the battle would be well over. It was the obvious choice to make, and Dallion made it.

Swerving by Arthurow's clumsy defense, Dallion gripped his sword and swung it forward. At the precise moment, Nox leaped at the Star as well.

No! a clear female voice filled the room, but it was already too late.

Two separate attacks slashed into Arthurows, ripping the body like a knife through paper. A dark line appeared on the torso in the area the harpsisword had sliced. Euphoria filled the chamber as Dallion felt the sensation of a deserved victory. Before he could say what was on his mind, though, black tarry liquid gushed out of Arthurows' wound at him.

I knew you'd mess up in the end. The Star laughed.

Everything turned pitch black.

Chapter 172: Out of Darkness

Harp? Dallion shouted. Nox! Lux! Nil!

There was no answer. Stranger still, there was no sign of them. While having Nox be invisible in complete darkness, Lux should have been clearly visible, not to mention that the harpsisword should have been able to respond. Dallion was still clutching to the weapon, or at least he thought he was. Just to be on the safe side, he checked, feeling the blade and strings of the harpsisword with his free hand. It was undoubtedly there, as was the shield.

Arthurows! Dallion shouted. Is this one of your tricks again?

Try as he might, Dallion was unable to see anything, even using his music skills. It was as if he had ended up in the center of an endless, cold void. Even the floor beneath his feet seemed to have vanished. Dallion was standing on something, but it wasn't stone; it felt more like an air bubble of some sort, or levitation.

Slowly, he took a step forward. Gravity was still present. That was a huge plus. Most of his senses, aside from his sight, were also present, although slightly distorted. His hearing had remained intact, although his sense of touch was somewhat numbed. As for taste and smell they were stronger than ever, making him feel as if he were in a tar pit. The sensation was unpleasant, but bearable. However, it still didn't answer the most basic questions of all where was he.

From what he could remember, just moments ago Dallion had been in the final guardian chamber facing Arthurows who apparently was the Star then he had suddenly ended up here. It still remained unclear where here was, although Dallion had his suspicions.

Lux, if you can hear me, set this thing on fire! Dallion shouted.

After several seconds, when it became clear that nothing would happen, Dallion tried to play a chord on the harpsisword. Normally he wouldn't have an issue, even without being able to see he had improved his music skills to the point he could play with eyes closed. This time, though, no sounds came out. The strings didn't even vibrate properly, as if they were submerged in water or more likely in tar.

Nice trick, isn't it? Arthurows' voice echoed all around. It's been a while since a musician tried doing that. I must admit, I find it amusing. Of all the people that would struggle, musicians were the most fun. Unlike the rest they used their heads, trying to emotion their way out of the jab, instead of hacking in the air.

Hearing that, Dallion immediately made a circular slash with his harpsisword. The blade sliced through the darkness, creating a whitish line behind. For fragments of a second Dallion imagined seeing through into the chamber. Alas, the line disappeared just as quickly as it had been formed.

Told you, Arthurows laughed.

I know. That's why I had to try.

Ah, typical Earth attitude. What will you do next? Start singing? For someone who's increased his music skills to such a point, you're really bad at it.

Despite the circumstances he was in, Dallion felt more annoyed by this comment than anything that had happened in the last hour. Who was Arthurows to insult him like that?

You barely show any feeling, have no songs of your own, and always do it in such a rush as if you're desperate to go to the toilet. A proper bard would have savored the experience and through doing so let others enjoy it as well.

You were in that line of work, I take it? Dallion looked around, trying to find the source of the voice.

Just an observer. More critic than artist, I'd say. They again, why do that when I can get talent for free?

Black tendrils darted towards Dallion, completely invisible in the background. Dallion, however, didn't rely on a single sense to notice threats. With a three-sixty leap, he twirled in the air slashing the space around him as he did. The sensation of cutting through jelly let him know he was successful in countering most of the attacks. The burning sensation of rubber on his left shoulder told him that he had missed one.

Annoying, isn't it? Arthurows laughed. The pain isn't that bad since we're still in an awakening realm, but the smell I can tell you stories.

Clutching onto his sword, Dallion tried to tear off the thick substance on his shoulder. The scorching sensation went up his fingers into his entire arm, forcing him to pull it away. Whatever the tar was, it was here to stay.

There was a time when the people of this world went through a tar baptism. Those that didn't respect the will of the deities were taken to a pit of reflection where living tar covered them, letting them know whose boss in this world.

Really? Dallion asked, despite the discomfort.

No, but it's a good story, right? Arthurows laughed again. But hey, who am I to judge? If you want it to be true, it might be true. Heck, maybe this only occurs to the chosen heroes of this world. Just think about it: you came here to save the city of Nerosal from my influence and succeeded. They will sing songs about you. Of course, they'll also include the part of you succumbing to my influence and turning into a monster that raged through the city until you had to be put down. A real tragedy.

Dallion extended his right arm forward, using the edge of the harpsisword to shave off as much of the substance as possible. This seemed to work as chunks of hardened rubbery substance peeled off. Sadly, that didn't get rid of the complete numbness that had taken hold of his entire shoulder.

I won't become a chainling, Dallion said in defiance.

Who said anything about turning you into a chainling? Also, who said it's your choice. You're already here, which means that Moons can't help you. In this place all bets are off. I can slice you to a thousand pieces and use you for sudoku practice and no one could do a thing.

Sudoku practice? Humor wasn't Arthurows strong suit.

You know there's a bit of irony here, the Star went on. Two generations ago, your grandfather did the same thing to someone else. There was a short pause. He transformed a person into the exact same monster you're becoming, all for personal gain. And for a while, he got it. But there's always a reckoning.

In that case you'll be in deep crap. I'm not here to help you or to give you false hope. I'm just here to tell you that if you can't save yourself, no one can. However, that doesn't mean you have to go about it all alone. Remember, you already have everything you need.

Dallion wanted to groan. Taking a deep breath, he recited the names of the Seven Moons. Once again, that put his thoughts in perspective. The trick Hannah had told him seemed to work every time the Moons did still have power in this place. Maybe things weren't hopeless after all?

Ignoring the pain, Dallion reflected on the situation. The best way to act was to treat this as a puzzle. Arthurows had placed him in a small dark room, or rather a cocoon of tar. Since Dallion was still himself, there was something that kept the chainlinging to take place, and the very same thing could well let him escape.

There was the obvious: he still had his harpsiwird, his armadil shield, the armor Eury had made for him, as well as the dartbow. Technically, he also had his two rings, but they weren't particularly useful at present. Then there were the skills he had. Music didn't seem to be of much help and neither was guard and attack. Possibly forging?

He wasn't alone when he came here, you know, Arthurows went on. There were two more with him. His folly sentenced them all.

And what about you? How did you end up like this?

Who says I did? Laughter echoed throughout the darkness.

Now Dallion could tell that he was lying. There was that slight note of uncertainty in his voice that a music level of thirty could detect with ease.

Meow?

The sound startled Dallion, almost making him jump. Instinctively, he looked in the direction where he'd heard it. Initially, the only thing he saw was darkness, but after a few moments something else appeared: scar marks.

Nox, clean the strings! Dallion shouted.

Both the cackling and Arthurows figured out what Dallions plan was. Nox turned out to be faster. With perfect precision he created a crack along the tarry substance over the harpsisword strings without harming them in the least.

Gasping the opportunity, Dallion played a chord. The strings vibrated, covering the entire weapon with a soft blue glow. Sounds filled the air, like a warm summer breeze.

Little mutt, Arthurows hissed.

The darkness unraveled unto a mess of strands, returning Dallion to the guardian chamber once more. The strands then merged together. It was not Arthurows that they created, though, it was the Star itself a faceless human silhouette entirely of pure darkness.

Keeping the initiative, Dallion played another chord while slashing at the entity with an arc attack. The attack was met with a rectangular blade composed of darkness.

The Moons wont help you forever, the thing that was Arthurows replied. A single star flickered on its forehead before disappearing into darkness. Sooner or later, theyll let you down.

A loud pop filled the room. A blink of the eye later, the Star was gone.

Did we win? Dallion asked, uncertain if this was another trick. Arthurows had deceived him so many times before, it was natural for him to fake his death as well. Did will kill him?

DAGGER Level 5 has been cleared

Claim the focus that suits you best.

The blue rectangle appeared, confirming Dallions victory. And a victory it was Dallion might not have defeated the Star, but he had managed to keep himself from becoming a chainling. In the back of his mind, he knew that the entity would be back to continue the scheme it had set up, but at least this day was his.

Tweek! Lux chirped from Dallions shoulder with a yawn. The firebird seemed immune to the tension that had taken place, preferring to nap. Then again, if it wasnt for it, Dallion would have lost the fight a dozen times.

Thanks, Dallion said, pressing the perception rectangle. After such an experience the whole leveling up felt like an afterthought. I owe this to you all.

The familiars didnt say a word. Just as they were familiars, they were also part of him, part of his realm, as the harpsisword had become.

I owe you everything. Fatigue kicked in. His legs started trembling, forcing him to get to the ground. Even a level thirteen awakened could only take so much pressure.

A lot of things happened. Dallion smiled. He had so much to share with the rest of the guild.

Chapter 173: The Thank You Gift

Back on Earth it was said that sometimes a second was enough to completely change a person. In the world of the awakened, that was especially true. Standing in the trial selection room felt like returning to a class reunion. It wasn't only the time that had passed in that single instant Dallion had touched the dagger, it was the experiences he'd gone through. In terms of his awakened nature, that was the journey that had transformed him into a man. Awakening wasn't just a cool ability or superhero power. This wasn't the carefree fantasy world Dallion initially believed it to be. Everything was much more complicated. There were deep conflicts hidden beneath the shiny surface of which Dallion knew nothing until now.

The mirror pool, the Crippled Star, the wars between nobles all these were things Dallion had read and heard mentioned many times, but none of them had had any real meaning. The evil wasn't a metaphor, it was very real walking about in human form with very specific plans for the Icepicker Guild and the whole city itself.

When Dallion had shared his experience in the dagger before the three senior members of the guild, the trial quickly came to an end. Dallion was taken to one of the training rooms in the basement level, while March and the other two captains went to inform the guild master.

It's been ten minutes already, Dallion said.

It didn't help that they had taken his shield and harpsisword as well. According to Vend, it was standard procedure to question the weapon guardians, since they normally had a better understanding of events than their owners. That didn't stop Dallion from feeling concerned. Thankfully, his link to Harp let him know that everything was alright.

Anything you can share?

Sadly, I'm not privy to the conversations.

That much was true. During the time Dallion was waiting, he had lost his link to Harp several times. Quite probably limiting artifacts were involved. That made him think of the ring Eury had given him. At present, the item was wrapped in a piece of cloth in his room at the inn. The way things were going, Dallion might have to keep it with him at all times. While it remained uncertain whether it would protect him against the Stars' next attempt to chainling him, at least it was proven to render him invisible to guardians.

Another minute later, Dallion heard approaching steps from above. Eager, he stood up. As expected, Vend appeared shortly after.

Have you been standing all this time? The elite shook his head. You need to learn to relax. Being an Icepicker is stressful enough.

The man placed a new emblem on the table. It was made entirely of star silver with the guild emblem. Turning it around, Dallion found that his name was etched on the back in perfectly stylized letters.

Congratulations, youre an official part of the guild now. Vend gave him a pat on the back.

Dallion kept staring at the emblem, uncertain what to say.

Id have brought your stuff, but Adzorg is being obsessive again, and wants to have a longer conversation with your guardians.

So what happens now? Dallion asked.

Youre a bundle of joy today, arent you? Today, you go rest. Normally there would be a feast planned to celebrate the occasion, but due to what happened the guild master decided to keep things on the low. Tomorrow it will be announced that you passed your trial and have your very own mentorme.

The last sentence rekindled Dallions spark of excitement, although it also brought with it a sensation of guilt. He had hoped that Euryale would return from the wilderness before the trial. That way, he would get to become her apprentice before the selection trial was over. Now he had no choice on the matter.

And Arthurows?

Things get a bit more complicated there. Officially, he remains part of the guild. After a week, well start making it a point that he hasnt shown up for a while. After that well try to find himwhich will failand after the celebration hell be quietly booted out of the guild. Given that hes always been a slacker, itll come to no ones surprise. Its no secret that hes been poking his nose in a few other guilds, including the top five.

So, thats it? We continue as if nothing never happened, he sighed. Any good jobs, at least?

A lot of better-paying jobs. Vend chose his words carefully. As for the other thing I know you can handle it. March knows that you can handle it. The people that were in the room during your trial, werent just high-ranking snobs. Theyve all been through a similar experience. Just as I have.

Dallion nodded. Being at the position they were, it was normal for the higher echelons to have gone through similar experiences, possibly worse. And still, he could never tell looking at them. They remained ordinary people with their flaws, inner demons, and eccentricities.

We all know about the things that lie beneath the surface. The trick is not to let it determine your life. The more you increase your level, the more things youll realize. What you do with that knowledge is up to you.

That was the trick, wasn't it? To continue to live his life as before despite what he had learned. In a way, Dallion felt as if he were in a bubble, like he was back in his village. The city didn't resort to echoes, and the bubble was far bigger so big that Dallion hadn't reached the limits, yet but it was there protecting the city from the dangers outside.

I expect you to be here at eight tomorrow, Vend suddenly changed the topic.

Wha?

I've spoken to Hannah, so I know your schedule. Also, you'll be going deliveries from now on, so be sure to check the guild ring for orders, then bring them in the morning.

Oh, and this is for you. Vend took a flimsy-looking stiletto knife from his belt and handed it to Dallion. Captain Adzorg wanted it to be a sword, but as your mentor, I thought this would be better.

Thanks? Dallion looked at the weapon. What is it?

This is your training weapon. It's made of tin, so they don't get any worse.

Dallion arched a brow as he gave his mentor a confused glance.

No need to thank me. The last task March gave me before I stopped being her disciple was to find a level zero weapon for the day I have an apprentice of my own. This will help you stack a few skill levels, but that's not its main goal. This is the means by which you try to push your limit.

Of course. It sounded so logical now. When it came to awakened training, flimsy items were better. Now Dallion had a lot of leveling up to look forward to. At his current state, he estimated he could get the weapon to level ten without issue. Afterwards, things were going to get a bit more difficult, though not impossible.

It is said that every item in existence has its maximum level, Vend went on. No one knows whether that's true, but this stiletto does. The more you improve it, the more you prove to yourself and the rest of the world how good you are.

Thanks. I

There's a single rule, Vend interrupted him. You can only do a level per day. This isn't some random limitation, it's for the sake of the item. Guardians are a bit confused after they are leveled up. You probably already thought you could get this to double digits in a day, and you can, but the item will never live to its potential if you do. The more you confuse the guardian, the more the item will change to the worst.

A level a day. That wasn't going to be a problem. Somehow Dallion suspected that his daily schedule was going to get a lot more packed.

Keep it on you at all times. And don't break it!

Sure. Carefully, Dallion tucked it away. Do you kick me out if it breaks?

That would be stupid. Just low-quality tin is difficult to come by. There's so much demand that the blacksmiths can't keep up. Anyway, take good care of it and he paused, then took another dagger from behind his back. This one Dallion recognized it was the same one he had fought so hard to get. Here's the prize for your trial.

Looking at it, the dagger didnt seem overly special in any single way, or rather it was nowhere as near as Dallions other weapons. The craftsmanship was fine, and the material it was made of caught the eye, but that was all. The weapon was hollow and incapable of being improved.

Its awakening special is durability. Vend placed the dagger in Dallions hands. So, you wont have to mend it, but thats all. As I told you, awakening daggers are not worth the effort. Its more the chase rather than the catch.

Its fine. Dallion smiled. Thanks, mentor.

Keep that up and Ill have you mend my room. Vend crossed his arms. Still, good job, Dal. Youve earned your spot.

Does that mean I get to stop being a packrat?

Well see. For the moment, have some fun.

Vend left soon after. A few more people passed to discreetly congratulate Dal. Soon his gear was returned. Both items were in perfect shape, though refused to share what their conversations with the guild higher-ups were about. Possibly that was for the better.

Dallion thanked each of the guardians in their realms, doing the same to Nox, Lux, and Nil, then left the guildhall.

So, how do you feel?

Nil asked as they made their way to the Gremlins Timepiece.

Calm, Dallion said. Relieved. Happy. Im not exactly sure.

You can always use your music skills on you. I must say that Adzorg tried to get you to be his apprentice, but there were too many rules that needed changing, so he relented. He thinks highly of you.

Ive heard.

And Vend is not as bad as some of the rest. At least it isnt March. Still, theres one thing he forgot to mention.

Such as?

The new guild emblem comes with one major benefit. Now, this might be difficult for you to grasp, so Ill explain it very slowly. You. Dont. Need. To. Talk. For. Me. To. Hear. You.

Precisely. Now we can lead a proper conversation without you having to talk to yourself like an idiot. And by we, I mean everyone youre linked to.

Undoubtedly it was quite an improvement. Dallion also suspected that Vend had omitted that on purpose just to have him make a fool of himself a few days longer.

Upon returning to the inn, Hannah was nowhere to be seen. What Dallion found instead was a large selection of food along with a hastily written note containing one single word: Congratulations! It seemed that the innkeeper was a softy after all, at least during one percent of the time.

Thanks, Hannah! Dallion said loudly. Thanks to his improved senses, he had heard her hiding in the kitchen, to Aspans annoyance. Ill be sure to eat up and get some rest before work.

Before that, there was one last thing he had to do.

ITEM AWAKENING.

Dallion entered the dagger. The realm continued to be lit up, but the sphere item description was no longer there. For that matter, there wasnt any description present. Apparently, once an item fulfilled its destiny, it stopped being interesting as far as the rectangles were concerned.

Taking a look around the starting spot, Dallion then linked the dagger to his awakening realm. A doorway emerged on the wall.

Nox! Dallion shouted.

Barely had he done so than the crackling rushed in. It had returned to its original small, cuddly self. Naturally, the first thing it did was to clump onto Dallions shoulder.

You never change, do you? He thought.

The crackling mewed in response.

Take a good look, Nox. From now on all this belongs to you. Dallion said. An unbreakable dagger with a crackling inside sounded like the perfect combination. Youre the guardian of this place now. Welcome to your new home.

Chapter 174: Old Complications

KALEIDERVISTO Level 2 has been cleared!

Continue on to fulfill the KALEIDERVISTOs destiny.

That was two levels cleared without any health loss. Dallion waved the rectangle away, then sat on the chamber floor. His progress couldnt be called fast, but then again, Dallion didnt care. All he was focusing on was clearing the entire item without losing any health in the hopes hed earn an achievement. At least thats what some of the guild members had said. When he had tried doing it in a group nothing had happened, leading to further clarifications that he had to do it on his own. Potentially that means without relying on familiars either.

Its not like anyone could tell the difference, Dallion replied. While alone he preferred to voice his conversations, especially when in awakened realms. Itll be done when its done.

Thats the fastest way to increase stats, Dallion replied.

It had been five days since he had become an official member of the Icepicker guild. Originally, he was supposed to start training under Vend the very next day. Due to complications relating to the Arthurows situation, though, he had been given some time off. In short, he had been asked politely

by Estezol to refrain from visiting the guildhall for three days during which things were sorted out. It didn't help that Euryale still hadn't returned from her mission. The gorgon had managed to somehow send him a letter apologizing for the delays as well as going into detail just how much she missed him. The letter had appeared attached to the outside of his window, unseen and unheard, along with a flower blossom. A nice gesture, though Dallion felt somewhat weird being the one getting flowers.

I'll get there. Dallion stood up. For now, it's achievements.

Playing a chord with his harpsword, he went through the gate to the final level of the sphere item. The final chamber was dark and fairly large. Using his music skill, Dallion could see three exits and nothing beyond. As he made a few steps, though, he felt something familiar. Bending down, he slid a finger along the floor.

Mother-of-pearl, he whispered. That was a stroke of luck. Of all the guardians he could have faced, he got a shelfey. As long as it hadn't spread throughout the entire level, this was going to be easy. Also, there was the chance he could learn more about the Star.

No problem, Dallion lied. He had every intention of finding a way to question the creature.

Making it to the guardian chamber was easy enough. From what Janna and Kallan had shown him in the past, getting inside was simple; all Dallion had to do was injure the tentacle that's blocking entrance to the guardian chamber, then run in as it contracted. Back during his first mission as a packrat, the siblings had used the destructive power of a crossbow to achieve the effect. This time, Dallion was going to take a more elegant approach.

The reaction didn't delay. With a roar, the shelfey pulled its tentacle in, allowing Dallion to run into the chamber through the opening.

LEVEL 3 GUARDIAN

Species: Shelfey

Class: Crippled Star

Statistics: 38% HP

There it was. The creature was smaller than the one during his previous encounter, merged with the corpse of what appeared to be a larger avian guardian. More than likely it had recently infected the sphere item, although when it came to awakened time recently was a relative concept.

Without wasting a moment, Dallion took out his Nox dagger and slashed along the length of the connecting wall of flesh. Sharing the power of the crackling within, the dagger created a thin line where it struck. Moments later the entire shelfey part of the creature fell off of the guardian's corpse.

KALEIDERVISTO Level 3 has been cleared!

You have fulfilled the KALEIDERVISTOs destiny.

Your attack skills have increased to 22.

Damn it! Dallion cursed. Why did the shelfey had to be so weak?

He had hoped that it would remain alive for long enough so he could attempt to extract information using his music skills. Sadly, the single attack had killed it.

FLAWLESSNESS!

(PERCEPTION +2)

It takes skill and precision to clear a sphere realm alone without sustaining a single hit. Keep it up! You dont need an achievement to do the smart thing.

At least the stories about the achievement had turned out to be true. Dallion would have hoped for it to go to his ??? attribute, but perception was the second best. Maybe he'll have more luck practicing his forging skills. Despite every effort so far, he had yet to increase it by a single point.

The chamber disappeared, returning Dallion to a large, expensive room in the real world. The vase-like he was holding, now emitted an orange glow. A fury was nearby, his eyes focused on Dallion.

There you go. Dallion tossed the item to the fury. As promised, one item cleared.

Indeed. Smashing job, the General said from the middle of his gold sand field. Youve paid this years rent.

Dallion didnt say a word. Renting wasnt the same as owning. Still, at least he had a year of freedom to look forward to.

If theres nothing else, Ill Dallion took a step towards the door, only to be stopped by a second fury.

You know, fulfilling your obligations doesnt have to be the only reason for you to come here, the general said. There are many opportunities for someone of your skills. If you were to occasionally clear a few more items, it could be well worth your time.

Thanks, General, but I think Ill stick with guild work for now.

Why go through a middleman when you could come to me directly? Its all the same after allI pay, you get the job done. Oh, and its very legal. You can ask around if you have any doubts.

Ive no doubt it is. In truth, Dallion had many doubts. Still, Ill stick to guild work for the moment.

Oh, well. The general made a sign for the fury to step back, granting Dallion access to the door. You can always change your mind. Its not like Ill run out of artefacts anytime soon.

Ill keep it in mind, sir. Dallion went to the door.

By the way, the general said as Dallion put his hand on the door handle. Art has been missing lately.

Hearing the name for Dallion on edge. It took sheer force of will and the mellody of Harp in his awakened realm to keep himself from reacting.

Its somewhat embarrassing, but he owes me a rather substantial amount of money, the general went on. And when I say money, I mean undelivered items. You dont happen to know anything about that, do you? Being in the same guild and all?

No. Dallion looked the general in the eye. I havent seen him at the guild lately. If I happen to come across him, Ill be sure to remind him.

That would be splendid, the general said with a cold smile. Well, dont let me keep you here.

Forcing a smile back, Dallion left the room. At least that was over with. Now he had training with Vend to look forward to unless something else came up again. Just to be certain, Dallion checked with his guild ring. According to Estezol, no changes had taken place, and Vend was already waiting for him in one of the training rooms.

That didnt sound well. From what Dallion had heard, Vend wasnt the sort of person who liked to wait. So, Dallion swallowed his pride and ran through the streets. One of the advantages of being an awakened was that he could run quite fast for a long time.

It took him about a quarter of an hour to reach the guild hall. Upon entering, he avoided the lobby section, going directly down to the training rooms. Vend was already there, sitting on a chair, tapping his foot.

Vend, Dallion immediately rushed to him.

Late on your first day? The elite shook his head.

My first day was supposed to be four days ago, Dallion countered.

Fair enough. He glanced at the stiletto on Dallions belt. Youve been working on it, I see. What level is it?

Five. A level a day, just as you told me.

Good. Let me know when it surpasses your level.

That was a bit harsh, though Dallion knew what he meant. The goal of the weapon was for him to push his limits. For the moment, he was merely catching up.

Any skill changes?

Ive reached my music cap, if thats what you're asking, Dallion replied. To be honest, he wasnt sure how to react, and to be honest, he didnt think Vend had any idea either. All the questions seemed almost scripted and suspiciously like something Adzorg would ask.

Good. Vend nodded. And you know what, lets drop it. He stood up. Never been good with the theoretical part anyway. Just come along. He went towards the staircase.

Where are we going? Dallion asked.

Stone Gardens, Vend replied.

Stone Gardens, according to Nil, was one of the later additions to the city. Originally it was just an empty space between sectors which held no importance whatsoever. A few merchant organizations had made bids to buy it, but due to its difficult access and the vast asking price, they had quickly given up leaving it barren. A few decades ago, one a minor noble who was disappointed in his children could not awaken, that he had changed his will to purchase the entire plot of land after his

death, leaving them with less than a tenth of his original fortune. While most of his heirs were content with what they got, the second son was so furious that he spent every part of his inheritance to remove every plant in the garden and replace it with sand and stones. Thus, the stone gardens were born.

When do I get to start some new jobs? Dallion asked, breaking the silence.

Soon. Have you decided on a specialization?

Im not sure. I was thinking to try out as a guild forger. Dallion hesitated. Was it a good idea to mention Euryale now? Maybe not. Ive already learned some forging skills.

Forger, Vend mused, not even asking Dallions skill level. A forgers nice, but there are better things than being a forger.

Oh?

I told you youve shown good skills in exploration. Even as a pack rat.

Well yeah Thanks, but no thanks. Dont get me wrong, leveling up is fun and all, but I prefer something different.

Vend stopped. You really are a lot like me. So eager to turn something down before you get all the details. Do you even know what an explorer is?

I was there during the rescue job, remember?

Thats precisely my point. All youve seen is jobs in low-level artifacts. Daggers, trinkets, a double-digit sphere realm. Theres more to it than that.

No. Im here to see how much youve improved. Vend looked around. What do you see in this place?

Lots of sand with a bunch of rocks. Back on Earth some of the rock groupings could pass for modern art, although even that was a stretch. Rather it was more like someone had hired a bunch of people to grab any large rock they could find and dump it here.

Its an area in ruin. No one takes care of it since its nothing much. However, with the festival approaching the lord mayor has ordered that every part of the city is to be mended. Guess which guild volunteered for this spot.

Sanitation?! Youve got to be kidding me! Dallion felt like crying. This wasnt a well anymore. It wasnt even a mansion, but far far greater. Mending this would be akin to a Herculean task.

You have a week, Vend said mercilessly. After that Ill bring March to inspect.

The fun just keeps on coming

This will take me years.

Only if youre really crap at it. And just to make things fair, the guild will let you pick three people to help you out. The only condition is that they mustnt have passed their selection trial. Things would get awkward otherwise.

I have to do this with packracts? Maybe it was going to be better if he did it on his own. Anything else I should know about? Nows the time.

I think that's enough. Vend turned around. Oh, and don't worry. No one will be keeping tabs on you. Your time is your own, as long as you get it done. Good luck.

Several minutes later Dallion was alone, staring at the small man made desert. This was not how he expected his training to start. As much as he tried to rationalize Vends decision, seeking some deeper logic, he suspected they had just given him the crappiest job because he was the new guy. After all, he had been the only non-senior member in the room during his second selection trial.

Within his awakened realm, the crackling meowed in amusement. So much for relying on him to help out.

For the next five minutes Dallion remained motionless, trying to get the idea of the task to sink in. After that he did what any sane person would do turned around and headed straight for the Gremlins Timepiece inn.

There was no way he was starting this task today, not after all the improvements he had done earlier. Or better still, if he could lock himself in his room for eternity, maybe things would look better afterwards.

My original might have made a few suggestions on the matter, but the final decision was Vends.

Dallion grumbled.

On the bright side, it's only mending. No one is asking you to level up such an area. Not to mention that sooner or later you have to move to something larger than items. That is, if you aim to go beyond the next gate.

Of course, that was what the echo would say. Dallion was all but convinced that he had orchestrated this, not that Vend wasn't to go along with it. No doubt he had thought the idea to be perfect let the apprentice do all the work, then give some words of advice.

By the time he got back to the inn, it was already mid-morning. To Dallion's surprise, more than the normal number of patrons had shown up. Apparently, with the festival on its way, people from outside Nerosal were starting to trickle in. If this was any indication the city would be packed by the time the event started.

Dallion! Hannah shouted with her usual stern expression as he stepped through the door. Come here!

Coming. Dallion quickly went to the counter. Outside he might be a double-digit awakened, but here he was just Hannah's employee. What's the matter?

What did I tell you about favors?

Err they have to be earned? Dallion tried to remember what conversation she was referring to.

I told you not to take advantage of others' hospitality. When someone offers you a favor, be sure to be there when they ask for one.

Okay? Dallion had no idea where she was going with this, but nodded nonetheless. Am I in some sort of trouble?

Before Dallion could answer, he heard approaching steps behind. Instinct made him turn around, ready for anything. However, as it turned out, he was definitely not ready for what followed.

Darude Dal. A very familiar blond girl dressed in a fine scarlet dress hugged him.

Gloria? Dallion managed to say, beyond confused. A hundred questions popped in his mind, but all he could do at present was return the hug for several seconds as he went through them all.

So nice to see you again. Ending the hug, she stepped back. It feels like it's been decades.

It probably has. What are you doing here? I thought you were busy running the village.

I was until we managed to level it up enough to get a few travelling emblems. The council elders are taking care of things now. That's why we decided to see how you're doing.

Veils here as well? Dallion looked around. That's great. There were a lot of other words he could use, but none he dared to. How did you find me?

The ring guardian told me. Since you made a big impression on her, she was able to find you using one of my grandfather's devices from back when he was in the city.

That's good. Not to mention terribly inconvenient. It wasn't that Dallion didn't like seeing them. He occasionally thought about visiting back, but this was too sudden. Where are you staying?

Always the idiot. Gloria chuckled. We're staying right here, of course. Hannah gave us rooms the moment we told her we were your friends.

With Jiroh gone and you being unreliable, I thought I'd use the extra help, the innkeeper grumbled.

That's nice. Dallion fought to keep the smile on his face. It's very very nice.

Now things really got complicated.

Chapter 175: Catching up

Food was always an event for the awakened. Economies were centered around it, guilds celebrated it, events were based around it. Everything an awakened did in the realms led to a vast need for food something that non-awakened and merchants alike could focus on without fear of awakened competition.

Dallion always looked forward to the occasion, even when he had to use his pay to get Aspan to make him an extra dish or two. Now that Hannah had offered to cover an entire feast for him and his friends from Dherma, he felt as if his appetite had gone.

So, you two are the rulers of your village? the innkeeper asked with a smile Dallion seldom received from her. It was almost as if important guests, or even her own children, had come back after a long vacation abroad.

Third generation, Veil said. He had changed quite a lot in the last few months. No longer the arrogant pain in the ass Dallion remembered, he had the look and demeanor of a self-made entrepreneur. At several times Dallion honestly thought he would start handing out business card and talk about investing in his new company of unlimited growth. But its not like there arent other awakened that cant handle things.

Yes, were tiny in comparison to this place. Even after the leveling up.

And it was all thanks to Dal? Hannah gave him a suspicious look.

This was exactly one of the things he was fearing. And as much as he wanted to deny it, both the shield and Hannah were right. Dallion had undoubtedly achieved a lot of things, but he remained a reckless tourist that got things done his way, regardless of how wrong and ineffectual that way sometimes turned out to be. In contrast, the Lior siblings were brought up with the idea that they would inherit the village one day. The practices of their grandfather had made them spoilt, arrogant, and sometimes cruel, but they had always known what was expected of them, and by the look of things a knack for it as well. If Aspion hadnt been obsessed with keeping them in the village, there was no telling how much they would have achieved.

Official county travel emblems glistened round both Gloria and Veils necks, the same that Dallions grandfather had earned all those years ago.

The duo had taken a very different approach to leveling up. Instead of focusing on item awakenings and shrines, one by one they had repaired, then improved every structure of the village. The effort must have been monumental. Dallion too had put in a lot of effort, though he had focused solely on items. Veil and Gloria had gone as far as improving the entire village area to the point it had been recognized by the county nobles as a level three settlement. It wouldnt be a surprise if Countess Priscord herself sent the county emblems, along with the respective titles.

Dal helped a bit, Veil said in mock snobbish fashion. Nah, Dal did most of the work, didnt you? Veil poked Dallion with his elbow. He set the ball in motion. We only followed up with the things he couldnt be bothered with.

Although it wouldnt have killed him to stay for a few weeks longer, Gloria added.

Im sure. The innkeeper narrowed her eyes. Suddenly Dallion felt he was in trouble without knowing why. But thats Dal, I guess. Head in the clouds, rarely ever on time, limited social skills

Limited social skills? Gloria laughed. Wow, the city must have changed him a lot. He didnt have a problem with that back home. In fact, he was rather cocky.

Upon hearing that, Dallion almost choked.

Yep, definitely something Dal would do. Veil nodded.

Seventy-five percent of the people at the table laughed, and while Dallion wasn't among them, that didn't mean he wasn't happy. Thanks to his music skills, he could see the genuine joy coming from his Dherma friends. Despite their doubts of a few months ago they had chosen to venture all the way to Nerosal to see him, and now that they had they felt that Dallion was the one doing a favor by being here.

Dont worry so much

Go ahead. Nows a good enough time as any.

That might be a bad idea.

After all, Hannah was here as well, and there were a few things he wanted to keep from her. But even if she wasn't, Dallion wasn't prepared for such a conversation just yet.

Nows not the best time. Maybe later.

You've been quiet, Gloria said all of a sudden, making Dallion snap back to the conversation at the table. Tell us how life's been treating you here.

Well, it's pretty much the same as before. Dallion gave the standard evasive answer. There's work here and at the guild. I've spent a fortune on clothes and gear.

Clothes, Veil sighed with empathy. I feel you there. Half of my item improvements back home were to make something wearable. I never thought that boosting perception would turn out to be such a nightmare.

Someone tried to warn him, but my brother can be more stubborn than Dallion, Gloria added. She, in contrast, seemed to have no issue with her clothes. At a single glance Dallion could tell that everything she was wearing was about level twenty more likely bought than made, although she did have a good eye for fashion.

I doubt there's a being alive that's as stubborn as Dallion, the innkeeper snorted. In the last week he kept on bragging how he'd become a double digit and passed his guild selection trial and now look at him.

That was an obvious lie, though in a certain way it was also the truth.

I didn't brag about it. For the first time in a long while, Dallion felt on the spot. And yes, I'm level thirteen now.

Three levels ahead, eh? Veil crossed his arms. Well see about that. I saw a few awakening shrines in the city.

Yeah, there are. Let me know when you decide to go there. Using them is a bit pricey.

Even with these? Veil tapped on his county emblem with a finger.

Even with those, Dallion replied with a sad smile.

One of the shortcomings of the big city. Hannah nodded. Everything costs more here. Dallion could barely afford a glass of water when he first arrived. I still remember how

You already mentioned that, Dallion interrupted, despite his fear. As expected, he got a quick slap on the back of the head.

How do you know what I was about to say? the innkeeper grumbled. See, what did I tell you? Its a wonder I still keep him! Hes mending tricks are old and dont attract new customers anymore. You, on the other hand. Hannah looked at Gloria. Youll be a big draw.

Veil, need a shield? Dallion said out loud, more for the shields sake than anyone else. The one I got is quite good in battle, but lately its been getting uncomfortable so Im thinking of getting another.

Shield? Veil laughed. I dont need a shield. That sword, though. Fancy parting with it?

Its a harpsisword, idiot, Gloria grumbled the way only a sister could. You need to know music to use it.

I dont need to know music to swing it around, her brother countered.

So Gloria crossed her arms with a clearly annoyed expression on her face youll go in battle with an exotic weapon you cant use just because it looks cool?

Yeah. Your point? Veil crossed his arms as well.

Internally, Dallion laughed. In some aspects nothing had changedbeneath the surface they remained the same two goofs as before.

Weapons are quite expensive here, Hannah said. Good ones especially. Dallion was extremely lucky getting his. Given you come from the edge of the empire, I doubt you have enough to buy something adequate. Youll have to rent one.

I have that one. Dallion pointed to one of the corners where his sword was leaning. It was the same one he had gotten from the chainling hunt.

Looking at it with his new skills, Dallion could tell that it was an adequate weapon. He wouldnt go as far as to call it good, but better than most things that were on sale, at least in that price range.

Not the best Ive seen, Hannah said. Give me just a moment. She stood up from the table and disappeared into the kitchen.

The first several seconds of her absence were marked with silence. Dallion felt unsure about starting a conversation, and by the looks of it Veil and Gloria didnt want to be the one constantly talking. In the end, Dallion decided to end the impasse.

Hows my family? he asked. Ive been meaning to write, but

I know, Gloria nodded. And theyre fine. Your brother has turned into quite the menace. I mean he always was, but because of the there was a short pause. This time Gloria felt uncomfortable with the topic. Because of the limitations, one couldnt always tell. Since you left, hes been doing all sorts of things to follow in your footsteps. Already hes saying that hell become an awakened by the end of the year.

If anyone could.

He doesnt want to use the shrine, Veil added. I offered. He says he wants to awaken the proper way like you.

Thats good, I think. Are there a lot of newly awakened?

No. Even the shrine cant change something if it wasnt meant to be.

Dallion nodded absentmindedly. And my mother?

Your mother Shes fine, but sort of sad. Its not you, though. I mean, its not only you. She seems sad about everything.

She sings a lot, Gloria added. Thats one of the things that makes her happy. I think she just needs time to readjust to being awakened again. There was another pause. A few people left the village. Mostly from our family. They didnt like seeing others rise to their level, even if everyone was better off. My father was the first to go.

Sorry to hear that. Dallion didnt need to know music skills to sense the sadness in her voice. Apparently, despite all the intrigue and familiar backstabbing, family ties remained strong.

Its alright. We knew it would happen. Im sure he knew what hes going. Maybe hell even return at some point.

Across the table, Veil let out an annoyed sigh. He clearly disagreed.

Oh, a friend of yours asked us to say hello. Like the flick of a switch, Dallions happy facade was back on. Was very insistent about it.

A friend? Dallion thought back. As far as he could remember, he didnt have any real friends, even before the time of his awakening. There were a few acquaintances, but they had quickly started keeping their distance, mostly due to the animosity between the former village chief and Dallions grandfather.

The well, Veil said with a semi-smile. Shes talking about the well. Moments later, he received a smack on the head.

The well? Dallion blinked. You mean the guardian?

You get to know your main guardians after improving a village a few times. Veil moved his chair slightly back to be out of reach of further attacks. The fountain is just as stubborn as you. Insisted he was your guardian. Refused to get improved.

He told you that?

Not in so many words. If he could actually talk, I'm sure he would have.

So, they too weren't able to hear guardians. That was interesting. Up to now, Dallion thought that the conversations depended on the guardian in question. Apparently, he was wrong. Which meant there had to be some other explanation.

The kitchen door opened, and Hannah emerged carrying an impressive-looking broadsword in its sheath. Arriving at the table, she drew it out, revealing a flawless blade of blue metal.

Rain iron, the innkeeper explained. Not the model of the day, but quite sturdy and better than you'll get from most shops. As long as you do a good job at the inn, you can have it. At least until you're able to buy your own.

You're giving me this? Veil said in astonishment, eyes sparkling at the sight of the weapon.

Yes, Hannah, Dallion said with a note of envy. You're giving him that?

It wasn't that the innkeeper hadn't made the same offer to him when he was looking for gear. From what Dallion could remember, at the time she had made a rather big fuss that he was spending his money on items rather than clothes.

Watch your mouth, the woman grumbled at him. I'm not awakened. What good will it do me? Besides, it's an attack sword. You wouldn't be able to handle it, anyway.

You mean they're battle gear, like Harp?

No, dear boy. What I mean is that they're specifically for people who have a strong inclination towards attack skills, which is to say that they forgo their guard skills altogether. It takes a lot to wield them, which is why they were usually reserved for elite soldiers.

If Dallion had to guess, that probably meant city guard captains at the least. Given that Veil was obsessed with attack, it could turn out to be a good fit for him, though that wasn't Dallion's main concern.

Not unless one wants to get their hands chopped off. As I said, they are very picky and temperamental.

Then what is Hannah doing with such a sword? And why is she keeping it in the kitchen?

This place is really gigantic, Veil said as they walked through the streets to the point that Dallion felt like a tourist just by being with him. You must have gone crazy with such crowds all the time.

You get used to it, Dallion said. Due to pressure from Hannah, he had agreed to give them a tour of the city. On his part, Dallion was hoping to get their help on his current guild task. I still cant believe you decided to come all the way here. What changed your mind?

The countess invited us five days ago, Veil replied, still looking through the produce of a nearby stall. That seemed to be another point of fascination, very much to the vendors joy. So far, they had gone through two dozen silvers for a variety of goods, the greater part of them useless in Dallions opinion. So, we got going. Dherma was getting a bit boring anyway, and its not like we could have reached double digits there.

The timing was terribly convenient. Five days ago was precisely the time Dallions encounter with the Star had occurred. Not only that, but Dallion had received an area related task the very same day they had entered the city. Maybe it was nothing but a series of coincidences, but after everything that had happened, Dallion could no longer be sure.

And youre sure youll be alright at the inn? Itll get quite busy soon.

Its perfectly acceptable, Gloria replied. And given I get to hear you sing, I think its a good deal.

Right

That was another promise Dallion had made. With three of them working at the Timepiece simultaneously, there was no way Hannah could pocket the expenses. It was therefore agreed that they would have to bring in enough customers by providing additional services, and since Dallion had the misfortune to mention he was learning barding to practice his music skills, he had been volunteered as the main attraction. He had offered to pay for his stay now that he was officially a junior Icepicker but Hannah didnt want to hear. In her words, it was high time he took responsibility and illustrated his abilities but bringing in more customers. The comment was so transparently self-serving that Dallion had accepted on that alone.

Anyway, the guild is a bit of a strange place, so dont freak out. Its very different from things at the village.

Itll be fine, Veil said, munching on something Dallion never had the courage to buy. Especially with this baby. He tapped on his newly rented sword.

About that. Be careful when you walk about with that after dark. Theres some thievery going on. Plus a mugging or two.

Let them try. The blond grinned. Ive been itching for a proper workout for ages. Boars, cracks, and guardians dont cut it.

It didnt take long for the group to reach the guildhall. Being mid-afternoon, most of the regular guild members had gone home, leaving only a few to hang out. That didnt keep all the ones there from staring at the siblings as they walked past. Apparently being a pure blond was considered a big deal in the city.

The person wholl be taking care of you is Estezol, Dallion explained. Hes a great guy and really good at this, just dont he paused. Making a note on the mans height was a certain way to attract more attention to the matter. Just be polite when you talk to him.

The comment earned Dallion a displeased glance from Gloria.

Estezol. Dallion waved quickly as they went into the main area to diffuse the situation.

Afternoon, Dal. The short man replied, scribbling something on a scroll. The moment he glanced up, his attitude quickly changed. And who have you brought here? he asked, a giant smile forming on his face.

These are my friends from back home. Veil and Gloria Luor.

Absolutely charmed. I always knew that Dal had good taste in friends, and I can see why.

They are here to join the guild

Theres nothing rare about it from where I come from. Even Eury didnt gather so much attention.

The entire city knows of the gorgon by now. Your friends arent and theyve arrived before the festival crowds. It will be like that for a few days. Dont worry too much.

Right

Never before did Dallion believe there would be something on which Nil and the armadil shield would agree on, but apparently the exotic nature of blondness was it.

Thats okay, right? Dallion said, slightly louder. He had half the mind to snap his fingers in front of Estezols face, but that would have been a bit rude. After all, Dallion had had a similar reaction the first time he saw a fury.

Oh, naturally. Id like nothing more than to have some friends of Dals join. The bearded man cleared his throat. Dal had probably explained that there is a twenty silver application fee?

I have. Dallion placed four gold coins in front of Estezol. And Im covering it.

I never doubted it for a moment. The coins were quickly retired, after which Estezol took out the few sheets of paper and started writing. I see youre already familiar with the basics. He pointed at the official emblems they were wearing. Thats a wonderful start. We dont get many celebrities here. He started scribbling something down. Your name and level, if you please?

Gloria and Veil Luor, Gloria said with a touch of snobbish dignity Dallion remembered from the time in Dherma. One had to admit that the approach was efficient, giving weight to the celebrity notion. Were both level ten.

Level ten? Estezol nodded, impressed. Whats your focus, if I might ask?

Pure attack, Veil said.

Perception and reaction, Gloria added.

Ah, specialized. Estezol wrote down. Perfect if you have a profession in mind. I assume youre not late bloomers like Dal?

No, Veil laughed.

We've awakened for quite a while, his sister said. Although until recently we were kept at low levels. I understand perfectly. A common occurrence with people of small villages, no offense. Still, to have reached double digits, is a remarkable feat.

We haven't had our second awakening trial yet, although I'm hoping we'll get a chance to do so soon. We'll do everything in our power to help you go through that.

Seriously?

Dallion narrowed his eyes. Where was all the support when he was trying to get to double digits? Although, admittedly, Arthurows had done everything in his power to hinder Dallion's development. At least that was one thing that his friends wouldn't have to go through.

And your skills are?

Attack, Acrobatics, and Athletics, Veil said with pride. And seven weapons.

All the combat skills. Gloria didn't miss a chance to one up him.

My, my. Rather impressive. One final question, more out of personal curiosity. What did you do to earn your emblems? As I said it's generally rare to have applicants with those.

We leveled up our village to a level three, Veil said casually.

At that moment, it was as if time had stopped. Everyone within earshot paused whatever they were doing and turned in the direction of the Luors. The semi-discrete glances had now become outright stares.

Isn't that marvelous? Estezol quickly snapped out of it with the professionalism only a PR person could. I'd have hoped that Dallion would mention such things.

It's no big deal. Veil shrugged. Dallion's grandfather did that as well back in.

Can they take the entry test now? Dallion interrupted. Talking about his grandfather was the last thing he wanted to do. Before setting off to the guild, he had gotten both Gloria and Veil to promise not to use his real name or mention his family to anyone. Clearly, it was too much to hope that Veil wouldn't mess up in the first five minutes after talking with someone. They're in a bit of a hurry, so I'd like to move this along. And just for good measure, Dallion added a bit of urgency through his music skills.

Oh, of course. Let me just fill out a few things and we'll be on our way.

The seconds dragged on. Oblivious, Veil kept looking around, asking about guild trivia of which Dallion knew nothing. Meanwhile, Gloria who knew she had become the center of attention got into her ice queen persona, making it a point to remain silent and ignore everyone but her Dallion and her brother.

Back so soon? A familiar voice broke the awkwardness in the air.

Looking in the direction of its source, Dallion saw Vend at the entrance. Thankfully, he didn't seem dazzled by the appearance of Veil and Gloria's hair.

I thought that you might ask for a job change, but this must be a record.

Vend, Estezol quickly said with a smile reserved for a parent who had their teenage son storm in during a visit from important guests. Dallion has invited some of his old friends to apply here. A warning note echoed. I'm sure you support the initiative given that he's your apprentice.

Dallion knew from experience that getting Vend to acknowledge or support anything was a tall order. To this day, the man had only complimented Dallion once. What was more, it was well known throughout the guild that Vend didn't have great respect for scroll scribblers.

Right. Vend smirked.

In fact Estezol narrowed his eyes you've arrived at just the right time. I was just about to send Gloria and Veil here to have their entrance trial. I'm sure you wouldn't mind assisting with that, considering your schedule is free.

This was the first time Dallion saw Estezol in such a light. The short man could be vicious when he wanted to, and considering he was pretty much part of the guild's administration, he probably knew enough tricks to make even elites cry. Vend must have realized it as well, for he marched up to him and reached out for the papers.

Let me see, he said with disdain.

Please.

Double digits? Vend asked in a matter-of-fact fashion.

Just level ten, Gloria replied.

Not the worst time to join a guild. Adequate skills

They have leveled up a settlement, Estezol chimed in.

The comment garnered a nod in recognition. Okay, let's head downstairs.

Let's just say that even the best of us have their biases. People with pure blond hair happen to be his and unlike me, he doesn't have the benefit of your thoughts on the matter.

Adzorg was biased against pure blonds? That was interesting and surprising, to say the least. The only person Dallion had known the captain to actively rage against was March; well, her and a few book authors his echo seemed to despise.

Got you. Ill keep them away from him until theyre in.

The evaluation room was exactly as it always was. At this time, a single person was there, keeping an eye on the training items.

Testing these two, Vend said as he went to one of the shelves.

The other guild member started what appeared to be a very lazy wave when he noticed the hair color of the applicants. At that point, he quickly straightened up in his seat.

Normally there are few basic tests before this, Vend went on, taking a grey cube. But since youre at ten, youll go straight to the combat part. Remember, the goal is not to defeat me, its to show what youre capable of.

The comment made Veil let out an overconfident snort, as if shouting dude, please; Ive been fighting guardians since Ive been six.

Understandable, Gloria said, adding a bit of ice to her tone. Dallion wasnt sure whether she was still putting on appearances or simply didnt like his mentor. Do we do this one at a time, or both at once?

Both. Saves time.

Can I watch in? Dallion asked. He too was curious how much they had progressed since the time theyd been together. I promise I wont make any comments.

As long as you stick to that. Vend turned around and held the cube in front of him. You know the drill.

Dallion and the Luors put a hand on different sides of the object.

ITEM AWAKENING

Chapter 177: Two Emblems

The training realm was much more structured than that of Dallions entrance test. A large stone pyramid rose within a field of columns surrounded by dense jungle. Looking closer, Dallion could see certain architectural similarities. If he didnt know better, he would almost say that someone had done a copy and paste from his own testing realm. Moments later, it became obvious why.

Hello to you all, an echo emerged. It had the appearance of captain Adzorg. Im the training echo of the exam and will be assisting in the evaluation. He briefly looked at Vend, before focusing on Dallion. Its a bit early for a reevaluation, isnt it, dear boy?

Hes here as an observer, Vend replied with a note of annoyance. Ill be testing these two.

Ah. The echo narrowed his eyes, clearly not thrilled with the idea. Apparently Nil was exaggerating about Adzorgs dislike of pure blonds. Where are you from, if I might ask?

Theyre from Dherma village, Dallion quickly replied. Were known each other since childhood.

Ah, friends of yours. The echos expression visibly changed. For a moment Dallion thought he saw a trace of relief beneath the layers of dislike. Very well, then. I trust that youd been told what to

expect? Just to be certain, though he gave Vend a disapproving glance let me go through it again. The entire goal of this exercise is to determine your awakened abilities and the manner in which you use them. Most often this is done through a fight, unless you have crafting skills.

Your goal is not to defeat your opponent. Despite his looks Vend is a guild elite of considerable talent, despite his misguided loyalties. In short, just demonstrate everything you are capable of even if you wouldn't in a real situation.

We have been through this sort of thing before, Gloria replied with pursed lips. She didn't seem to particularly like the echo either. Dallion might have forgotten to mention that we were recruited to take part in a chainling hunt by an envoy of the Archduke no less.

Tension formed in the air. The echo wasn't pleased that someone had spoken back to him, while neither Gloria nor Veil were used to being looked down on. All their life they were the ones who had looked down on others, and even after they had stopped the practice, they still weren't used to the opposite. Not from an echo in any event.

Gear up. Vend remained as calm as always. This wasn't the first annoying situation he had been in and no doubt wasn't going to be the last.

Suddenly a second copy of the elite appeared, identical to the first. Dallion took a step back. Seeing his reaction both Vends waved a hand dismissively.

It seems you have a lot to learn, one of them said to Dallion. You, come with me. He pointed to Gloria.

You, the other instance said to Veil. Let's go there.

Ill get to it.

Come along, Adzorgs training clone said. Let's get a good view.

Is this normal practice? Dallion followed.

Of course not, but it's Vend we're talking about. That boy is so lazy, I'm surprised he didn't create two echoes and have them do the trial. Clearly his mentor has been neglecting her duties. If it were up to me, he'd have taken on an apprentice ages ago. It's not just a matter of guild obligation, it also helps development. There comes a point after which the only way a master could learn is through his apprentices. Either that or war.

Ready to start? Vend shouted.

Go ahead, Adzorgs echo shouted back. See? No patience whatsoever.

Both training fights started moments after. Initially Dallion focused on Gloria. As before, the girl relied on evasion and ranged attacks. To his surprise, he found that she somehow had also obtained

a pair of dartbows, and they were far better than his own. Just as curious, he hadn't noticed her carrying them so far.

Dallion's initial reaction was to deny it, although when he thought about it, it sounded very much like the village chief to hoard his treasure in that huge mansion of his. Thinking back, there had been a vast number of weapons in the chief's awakening room, even if most of them had been chained.

Gloria's style of fighting was the same as Dallion remembered it. Having improved her reaction, she avoided any direct confrontation, moving away from Vend while shooting bolts at him in sequence. Whenever the elite managed to get close to her, a brief melee exchange would follow, during which she would use the short blade of her weapons underside to perform a series of blocks and counters, before using acrobatics to increase her distance again.

It was beautiful, as if watching a dance or ballet. If Dallion had faced her back when he was level ten, there was every chance he would have lost unless he resorted to his music skills. However, from where he stood now, there could be no comparison. Watching her fight Vend was like watching a kitten charge a tiger. Dallion could see her openings, and just as he could see his mentor not taking advantage of them. To make things worse, Dallion didn't think he would have fared better against Vend, either.

You realize it, don't you? Adzorgs echo asked. The difference in levels.

There never was a chance she could win, was there? Dallion whispered.

Not in the least. Unless equipped with magic, a single digit awakened has no chance of winning against an established double digit. That's why double digits don't pick fights with singles.

And if they do?

If they do, they risk trouble. Awakened aren't immortal. If one person keeps everyone else down, the entire domain will suffer after his death. It's simple logic and mathematics. That's the main reason the Imperial Eyes keep the noble families in check. If a major family becomes too oppressive, that would weaken the empire, so steps are taken. Which is why the countess is in so much trouble.

In trouble?

Shh. Let's watch the fights.

After a while, it became clear that Gloria's struggles would get her nowhere. While complex, she had a behavior pattern that was identifiable. It took Dallion a few minutes to catch elements of it, after which he pretty much knew what she might do in most situations. After a few minutes more, he redirected his attention to the other fight.

Veil's style of fighting, in contrast, could be described as the embodiment of chaos. While starting with some predefined forms, every counter was chosen on the spur of the moment. The blond had returned to using two massive broadswords, using them to parry and attack. The instances of him

evading were few and far in-between, even if well executed. What he excelled in was making such fierce attacks, forcing his opponent to be on the defensive.

Does that mean Im better now?

Dear boy, in terms of pure attack, youre nowhere close.

The comment felt like a kick in the gut. The saddest part was that it was likely true. When it came to attack skills, Veil had the upper hand. However, that had never been Dallions true strength. His genius lied in the way he combined skills, or so he thought.

Both fights continued for about ten minutes far longer than Dallions. Thinking about it, his session with March was probably a joke. And to think that he was under the impression that he could land a few hits. The same could be said about Dallions fights against Euryale. That recollection, on the other hand, made him flustered for a moment. The whole thing would have been embarrassing if she hadnt liked him.

Glorias fight was the first to reach its end. After a rather fierce close combat situation in which the girl had tried to shoot him from point-blank range, Vend had simply stated it was enough. Veils continued a few minutes longer with Veil constantly increasing the complexity of his attacks. Jumps, triple spins, and somersaults were combined with combinations of slashing and piercing attacks. In the end, however, a misstep made him lose balance for a fraction of a second, which in the eyes of him and Vend marked a defeat.

Lets go, Adzorgs echo said, joining Glorias group.

Veil and the second Vend soon followed.

Not bad, Adzorgs echo said. Theres considerable promise, thats to be sure. And no bad habits, for a change. He glanced at Dallion for a moment, then turned to one of the Vends. Your thoughts?

Theyll do, the elite said. As he did, his other instance disappeared. Well see how they do at the selection trial, but theyre good for now.

Thats it? Veil asked. Dont we get any advice or hints?

Theres no point. Without passing your second awakening trial you wont be able to improve. Get that done and well talk again.

Veil let out a snort of disappointment. Gloria, on the other hand, nodded.

Were done.

The training realm disappeared, replaced by the small training room. Without any fanfare, Vend returned the cube to the shelf, then left the room without the word. Dallion and the rest remained still and speechless for several seconds more, uncertain how to react.

So, Veil spoke first. What happens now?

We go to Estezol, I guess? Dallion wasnt at all sure.

Riiight

Okay, lets go, Dallion said.

The trio returned to the guild lobby, where Estezol was waiting. Vend, of course, was nowhere to be found.

Welcome back. The bearded man smiled wildly. How did it go?

Vent said theyll do. I assume that means theyve passed? Dallion asked. He didnt stick around to give any details.

Of course he didnt. Estezol shook his head. I wouldnt expect anything less from him. Can you lend me your guild ring for a moment?

Dallion started taking it off, but was quickly stopped by Estezol, who only put a finger on the metal band. An instant later, he pulled his hand back again.

Alright, everything seems to be in order. Just give me a moment, I'll go get your emblems. As you know already, you still have to go through your selection trial. Not that I have any doubts, its just part of the procedure. Once thats over, both of you will get your own individual emblem marking you as a junior member.

Junior? Veil asked, shocked at the prospect.

Yes, its how things start. As a junior member you also get assigned a mentor who will help with training and your path to full guild status.

Were not sure well stay here for that long, Gloria said. Were here on the countess invitation and well be returning to Dherma after the festival is over.

Oh. Estezols smile lost its glow. Thats a shame. Anything I could do to convince you otherwise?

Dallion could feel for the man. It was similar to a pair of online celebrities joining a local game server, only to leave a few weeks later. Of course he was going to do everything in his power to entice to stay. Knowing Gloria and Veil, though, Dallion didnt think they had any interest. Joining a guild probably felt like part of the city experience more than anything else. Then again, there was always the chance that he was wrong, and they decided to stay.

Seeing that he couldnt convince them, Estezol went into one of the back rooms.

Its a cool place if you decide to stay, Dallion said while they were waiting. At least until you mass your second trial.

Its really not for Gloria began.

Sounds good. Well see how the geezers take care of the village, Veil interrupted. Im not leaving them to mess things up again. Once is enough.

Once? Dallion asked.

All that happened was that they asked him to take a break for a few days. Gloria crossed her arms.

And during those few days nothing happened! Veil snapped. I could have improved half the houses in that time! He caught wind of his sisters icy glare. Fine, a quarter then. Point is that everyones slacking more than normal. Not to mention the family is a mess. Never could stand most of them, but now

Now you see why I was so eager to drag him here, Gloria whispered.

An awakened workaholic warrior definitely a scary combination to behold. Thinking about it, maybe it was a good idea that they wouldnt be staying. If Veil continued to be so competitive he wouldnt rest until he became a captain, at least, and would no doubt pester Dallion to do the same. In his mind, Veil probably considered him a rival. Then again, if that was the way he wanted it, it was only normal for Dallion not to let him down.

Here we go, Estezol arrived shortly after. Two Icepicker emblems. Id say keep them visible, but considering the ones youve already got, its not obligatory.

Thank you, Gloria said, then put her on. What do you think? She turned to Dallion.

It suits you, he replied honestly. Welcome to the Icepicker guild.

Chapter 178: Performer's Plaza

There were many mistakes a person could do in life: hang around the wrong crowd, do something stupid to impress someone, gamble on something without any knowledge of whats involved. Dallions mistake was to ask so what do you want to do now to a pair of people whod never seen a city and were only going to remain there for a month.

If Dallion thought that taking them from the inn to the guild was bad, he wasnt mentally prepared for what followed. Soon enough he found himself pushing through crowds into parts of the city that until then he didnt know existed. To make matters worse, every few steps Veil or Gloria would stop to examine a shop or stall, sometimes with the intention of buying. It didnt particularly matter if the item was normal or awakened-made. The haggling seemed to be the focus rather than the end result.

Prices here are wild, Veil said on one of the rare occasions they stopped at a city fountain to get some rest.

Told you, Dallion grumbled back. Thats what guilds are for. You cant get anything on inn pay alone.

Yeah. Still nice to get a room and food for free.

The words were specifically chosen, but if Veil and Gloria caught on, they didnt show it. Either that, or they didnt care. It wasnt them who would get the earful, after all.

Okay, but theres one last place I want to see, Gloria said.

Again? She had used the same phrase six times so far.

The lady at the last stall told me to see the performers plaza. We got to talking and when she learned that I had high acrobatics skills, she asked whether I was a dancer.

Dallion already knew where this was going, so without arguing he just stood up and followed the girl to whatever next part of the city she wanted to go. As they did, he kept a vigilant eye out for mirror pool awakened. Since the Grey Harbor confrontation there hadnt been any further incidents, but Dallion wasnt going to bet his life and gear on the word of a syndicate crime boss, or the local equivalent.

Technically true. Although, walking about the neighborhood or going to your love interests workshop isnt what Id call going about. Objectively you have seen more of the city in the last few hours than in the months before that. That has to tell you something.

It tells me Im not a tourist. Besides, you could have told me about all these places.

Oh, and given you an even better excuse not to go visit them? That would have worked out splendidly, Im sure.

It took about ten minutes to reach the performers plaza. Initially, Dallion thought hed see a mix between a circus and a renaissance fair. Reality was far stranger and he had to reluctantly admit cooler. The entire plaza was set up in such a way as to leave a vast open space in the middle, while the sides were packed with a combination of taverns, performer guild halls, and music shops. Scores of ropes connected the buildings on all sides of the plaza in an intricate game of cats cradle. And just as in a game of cats cradle, they moved, while awakened walked, danced and jumped along them, as ordinary people walked below. In one section it was impossible not to notice the performers were far more scantily dressed, and their performance was much more extravagant than that of their counterparts.

Groups of bards and musicians clustered on the ground, although from what Dallion could see, quite a few of them were awakened.

Does that mean Im special?

What it makes you, is especially annoying. Unlike dancers, bards that cant dance arent taken seriously.

No, like a fighter with only guard skills.

The remark hit its target. Back when Dallion had awakened, that had been one of his serious problems. Granted, a bit of trickery had let him use it very much to his advantage, but had he skipped taking the attack skill early on, things would have been very different right now. Most likely he would have ended up sealed off like his mother and forced to live the rest of his life with an echo limiter in Dherma.

Not bad, Veil said. Both he and Gloria had paused and were silently observing the performers. Dallion could almost hear their inner monologues comparing themselves to what they were seeing. What do you think?

The corner ones are good, Gloria noted. Very good. Those in the middle are pretty bad.

Sounds about right.

The good ones dont rely on the plaza to make a living, someone said nearby.

Looking in his direction, Dallion saw a chubby man in a rather expensive silken suit. The hair, the moustache, even the jewelry he was wearing was so cliché that he might as well have put a name tag stating his job as scummy manager.

This is a place for training and fun, the man said. The good ones only perform at theatres. No point in displaying their talents for free.

What do you think theatres are, dear boy? Its not something you could enter at present, even if you did have the means for it.

And how do I get to join a theatre? Gloria raised her chin slightly.

Normally its a long and bothersome process, but given that the two of you are the mans smile widened memorable, I would say something can be arranged. Provided you demonstrate some skills. Youre a duo, I take it?

I think you should take a better look at their emblems, Dallion said. Lets go, guys.

I have, and thats precisely why Im making the offer. Season celebrities are a very big pull, especially during the festival. The man wasnt giving up. You dont need to give me an answer now. Just think about it. If you decide you know where to find me.

How good? Gloria asked.

Dallion had to admit he was curious as well.

Instead of an answer, the fat man clapped his hands. The moment he did, one of the rope dancers leapt off her support, made a triple somersault, and landed a step away from Gloria. Initially, only a few people in the near vicinity took notice. Within moments, though, whispers emerged, spreading like wildfire. There was talk that a pure blonde had made a challenge, which in turn got others awakened interested.

Dallion blinked. Has Gloria just started a dance-off? Given that guild duels were allowed and encouraged, it stood to reason that personal awakened challenges would be as well. The fact that Dallion hadnt noticed any so far only proved Nils point that he needed to get out more.

Hagel here has been a professional stand-in for several years and even became a double digit a few months ago, the moustached man introduced her. That is the level you need to match.

Gloria looked at opponent from head to toe. Slightly taller, Hagel would have easily passed as a goth back on Earth. Slender, fit as most acrobatic awakened were and two shades paler than Gloria. She had finely crafted tattoos along her arms and legs partially covered by a black short-sleeved shirt and the local equivalent of black shorts.

Any rules I should be aware of? Gloria ignored the man, asking Hagel directly.

Might be better if you remove your shoes, the goth replied. The trash talking had already begun. Well be dancing up there.

Good to know. Gloria responded with an icy smile. How much is the ante?

Uttering the words caused a gasp move throughout the crowd. Dallion swallowed. Unlike his friends, he knew that adding an ante made things all the more personal, and as a result expensive. If there was a chance for this to have been a friendly competition, it was gone now. The other thing Dallion knew was that he'd likely be asked to cover the cost.

Five gold coins, Hagel said.

Why not ten?

Ten is fine. To Dallion's surprise, the corners of the woman's mouth curved up in a smile.

There was no malice or hatred vibrating in her. Almost everything was deafened by the desire for competition and the glee of finding someone worthwhile to compete against.

Dal. Gloria turned to him. Can you

Is my word good enough? Dallion asked, taking out his guild emblem. Things had proceeded, just as he had suspected. Ill cover the loss.

Its fine. The goth nodded. The same goes for me.

In that case, the fat man stepped up to them. Lets get this started. With an oily smile he glanced at each of the competitors, then at the battlefield above. The rules are simple. First to fall loses.

Thats all? Gloria tilted her head in surprise. Nothing about elegance, style, or performance?

You can just stand still for all it matters, the man laughed. Of course, theres the audience as well. If you dont entertain them, they can throw things to knock you off. And of course, so could your opponent.

That was interesting a spectacle in which the audience could participate as well. It also meant that local favorites had a clear advantage. Gloria must have realized this as well, for briefly examined the crowd.

No weapons, of course, the man was quick to add. This is just a friendly wager, after all.

What about the music? Dallion asked. Who gets to play the music?

Oh, I think well manage to find someone. The fat man grinned. Is that acceptable?

Dallion looked at Veil who only shrugged as if saying Hey its not my pride or money. A few seconds later, Gloria nodded.

Its fine.

Without hesitation she removed her boots one by one, all the time making a point not to sit on the ground. Once done, she picked them up and was about to shove them to her brother, though after some consideration handed them to Dallion instead.

Once that was over, Gloria jumped up and landed elegantly on the nearest rope between buildings. For a short while she tilted about, getting comfortable with the battlefield, then remained still in anticipation. The very next instant, her opponent joined her on the ropes.

Do a few jumps, the goth suggested. Its less fun if I beat someone unprepared.

The jab was not left unnoticed by Hagel, who performed a corkscrew jump of her own. Two distinctly different styles one single goal: to prove to the other and everyone else whos boss. Then the music started. It was just a mandolin at first, letting out a rather intense tune that would be at home during any metal concert. One by one other musicians joined in, creating a spontaneous orchestral performance within the entire plaza. At that point, the challenge began.

Hagel was far more confident at first. Taking advantage of her home terrain, she flipped and spun from rope to rope, as none competing dancers moved off the field of challenge. A sort of acrobatic breakdancing she rhythmically shortened and increased the distance between her and Gloria, taunting her to respond. And Gloria did. Using the same type of acrobatics she did in combat, she flew right at Hagel in a game of dance chicken. Missing her by inches, Gloria then made a back somersault, landing at the precise point at which she started.

Her perception is crap, Veil whispered to Dallion. Reactions are better, though, but thats not a big deal.

You can tell? Dallion asked, impressed.

Please. Weve been fighting guardians for years since you left. I know what I see.

The first audience participation took place in the form of a piece of fruit aimed at Gloria. It was effortlessly avoided, although Hagel took it as an excuse to commence with more direct attempts to get her opponent knocked off. Apparently, as far as the goth was concerned, the kid gloves were off.

Doing a handstand, the goth spun her legs violently around. Gloria could have easily avoided that by jumping back, but she didn't. Instead, she blocked each attack with her elbows, after which jumped up and spun-kicked several of the crowd's fruits at Hagel.

The approach was interesting, to say the least. Since she was smaller in frame, and not willing to enter a direct confrontation, relying on crowd projectiles was the same as if she were using projectile weapons herself. Moments later, the crowd caught in.

Now it gets interesting. Veil crossed his arms.

The two styles of dance fighting became even more distinct. Hagel kept trying to shorten the distance and do a direct attack, while Gloria refused to let her. The amount of flying fruit increased as the crowd no longer saw it as a means to knock the blonde off, but rather as the means to provide her with ammunition in battle.

Several of the musicians broke off the main melody, starting a tune of their own based on Gloria's movements. Catching on more did the same until there were three distinct melodies, all merging into one. About ten percent kept playing the main battle there as a background score, while the other two groups focused on their respective champions. Melodies faced each other as violently as dance moves.

A minute of fighting became two, then five. Fatigue started seeping in. One didn't have to be an awakened to see the pressure the two dancers were under. And still none of them could let go. Gloria landed on a rope, remaining there static for over three seconds. At that moment Dallion knew the outcome he could see it all unfold in his mind, just as he could see the victor.

Unaware, Hagel took this to be a sign of weakness in her opponent, so she dashed forward for the win. That proved to be a costly mistake. The moment the two were in immediate proximity, Gloria who had only been avoiding audience fruit until now grabbed hold of the rope with her hands. This was the first time she had done so. The action caused the goth to hesitate. Sensing that she was heading into a trap, she tried to leap back, but it was already too late. Copying the same spin kick that Hagel had started with, Gloria mercilessly attacked her enemy. However, instead of aiming at her upper body, she aimed at the shins.

Unable to evade, the goth tried to block, but the attack proved stronger than she could handle, knocking her straight off the rope and to the crowd below. A moment of complete silence filled the plaza as people stared in disbelief at what had happened, before erupting in a roar of applause.

Told you, Veil laughed. Bad perception.

Right. Dallion joined in the clapping. No doubt that was one way of putting it. It also didn't hurt that Gloria's dartblades were holstered to her calves.

Chapter 179: Mandolin and Ringchord

Gloria, Dallion said for the fifth time. It's fine. You don't have to.

The objection was promptly ignored as the girl continued examining the musical instruments. After her outstanding victory in the plaza and after the gathered people had dispersed, getting back to their

daily chores it had turned out that Hagel didn't really have the money to pay her bet. Rather, she didn't have it in gold. As such a compromise was offered Gloria could choose any instrument within reason from the goths family music shop.

Despite Dallions objections, the offer was quickly accepted by Veil and Gloria, who dragged him to the shop to choose the musical instrument he'd play with. No amount of logic seemed to help. The two were set on him picking something, or they would do it for him.

What about this? Gloria asked.

It's a mandolin.

I know that. What do you think about it?

It's very Dallion spent a few moments trying to search for the appropriate word. Ultimately, he failed. Mandoliny.

What the heck is a ringchord? Dallion whispered.

One of the modern instruments. It was all the rage back at the time. I had a few, all gifts, mind you, but never found the time to learn to play them properly.

Something told Dallion that it was more than a lack of time that kept him from learning. Even so, he was curious what a ringchord was. Given how objects were named in this world, there was a basic understanding that there would be rings and chords involved, though what else remained unknown.

Did you say a ringchord? the owner of the shop asked. As Dallion had come to know, the old man was Hagel's grandfather and also an awakened who had retired from guild activities years ago and now enjoyed the calm of dealing with people all day long.

Looking at him, one could guess where Hagel got her fashion sense. The man was just as pale, with enough tattoos on him that he could pass as a living tapestry.

Do you have any? Dallion just asked, masking the fact that he knew nothing of the instrument.

Haven't heard anyone ask for one since I was a child. The old man stroke his thin beard. What do you know? Some of Hehe's friends actually have an actual appreciation of music and don't just jump about to it all day.

Grandpa! Hagel said. Embarrassment emanated from her like a beacon.

I'm only saying that it would be nice if you bring someone proper for once. Is that wrong? the old man continued making the situation worse. You're so focused on the theatre that you skip out on everything else. By the time you come to your senses all the good ones will be taken.

Mumbling to himself, the man went to the backroom. While he was gone, an awkward silence filled the room with everyone pretending to be examining one musical instrument or other. All but Veil, who seemed to enjoy having a laugh at this. A short while later, the old man returned with a small wooden box.

Please. He handed it to Dallion.

Feeling a tingle of excitement, Dallion opened the box, revealing a set of thin metal strings and oddly shaped rings. There was no clear indication of how they had to be worn or even used. The one thing that was interesting, was that the effort that had gone into crafting them was considerable. The rings weren't made through a mould, rather they were forged the standard way. Dallion could see over a hundred folds on them using his forging skills.

Dwarf made, the shopkeeper said. Seven strings, with the option to be increased to nine. Tuned to perfection.

Hmm. Dallion nodded, pretending he understood what the old man was talking about.

Nil, Ill need some help here.

While I have many areas of expertise, exotic dwarven music instruments isn't one of them.

Harp, please ask the shield to help me out.

Gently, Dallion took out one of the rings. The design was such that they could be fastened and loosened to match several finger sizes. Some of the rings had grooves and spots to have the end of the strings attached, while others were more like guitar slides.

Dallion picked up one of the rings.

Be sure to string them first. It would be embarrassing otherwise.

With a mental grunt, Dallion placed the end of the string to each of the rings, then put them on. That done, he attached the other end of the strings to three more rings of a similar shape.

That's it. Now put those on your ring index, middle, and ring finger. That's what makes the heart of the instrument.

Now, put a few of the thicker rings on your pinkies and thumbs, and you're done.

As Dallion did, everyone watched him in amazement. Even Veil nodded, impressed at the intricacies.

It's rare for someone your age to know how to use a rinfchord, the shopkeeper noted. Where did you learn to do it?

I just read about them, Dallion toned down the lie. Never have played one to be honest.

Uttering those words proved to be a mistake. Emotions lit up, ranging from expectation to disbelief. Several of the people believed that he had experience with the instruments but was resorting to false modesty. The rest were wondering how well he would do, and were willing to forgive some small errors.

The experience was weirda mix between playing cats cradle and doing a guitar solo. The strings and rings were well crafted, letting out a unique, slightly metallic sound. After getting a grasp of things, Dallion went for a full chord. The result was almost competent, making him go for another attempt. That was one was better, though not to the level he would have liked.

Im really not good at this, Dallion said, taking the rings off. I think Ill go with a mandolin.

You know best, the shopkeeper sighed. Id say you have promise, but theres no point in doing something unless your hearts in it.

How much does it cost? Gloria asked all of a sudden.

Cost. The old man rubbed his beard again. Its absolutely priceless. Which is to say it has no price. Musicians arent interested. It takes to be an awakened to play it, but since this model isnt made of special metals, no one will buy it. There was a short pause. Theyre still a good set of rings, though, so Id say five.

Would that and a mandolin cover the debt? Gloiria asked. She was still determined to get the instrument.

What about this? Veil asked, holding a pan flute. He wont be able to sing, but its a single glance from his sister made him reconsider and place the flute back from where he took it.

That ones good. Hagel pointed at one placed near the ceiling of the shop. For that price.

That and the ringchord hmmm. The old man kept stroking his beard. Everyone could tell he wanted to haggle, but at the same time, since there was no buying in the direct sense of the word, the whole thing seemed somewhat awkward. I guess its alright. Provided that you visit now and again. If things dont work out between you to, maybe you could put some sense in Hehe here.

It took an advanced set of skills to make everyone somewhat uncomfortable with a few sentences, but the old man had done just that. Without a word, Hagel took the mandolin and handed it to Gloria. On her end Gloria accepted with a nod, then taking it and the box of rings, left the shop.

Well, congrats. Veil slammed his arm on Dallions shoulder. You get to sing in half an hour. Then left as well.

Thanks, Dallion said before he, too, headed to the exit.

I hope it brings you luck. The old man smiled. Everyone could use more of that.

With evening approaching, the plaza was starting to get more crowded. People were starting to treat it more as a destination than a place leading to other parts of the city. The oily manager was still there, picking up his attempts to recruit Gloria in the theatre business. The girl still refused, although she agreed to take his contact token. From what Dallion had learned, they were the local equivalent of business cards that had a pager inside. The token contained an echo of the awakened who could constantly keep others up to date as to the originals whereabouts. Once that transaction was done, the trio went back to the Gremlins Timepiece.

Word of a pair of pure blond awakened working at the inn has already spread. If Dallion thought his first few days had brought in a crowd, he hadnt seen anything yet. Hannah was happy with the turnout, and naturally she insisted on Veil taking the first shift. That left Gloria free and Dallion

sentenced to a chair in the far corner of the room from where he was to play his newly acquired mandolin.

Can I at least go to my room for a bit? Dallion asked.

Ten minutes, Hannah said. Then you start.

Fine. See you in ten minutes. Dallion rushed up.

The first thing he did upon arriving was to put the ringchord box at the bed stand. The second was to enter his awakening realm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

His surroundings changed, taking him back to the familiar room. Upon arriving, Dallion quickly went to the part of the realm that was linked to the harpsisword. Looking into the distance, the sea was as soothing as ever. This time, the nymph wasnt on the top of her tower, but at the lowest level, expecting him.

Hey. Dallion approached. After surviving the Star encounter, he had gone to see the guardian almost as much as he had Nil. Every now and again hed do so asking for advice or to discuss things that he didnt want Nil to hear. I need some help again.

The nymph nodded.

Im thinking of asking Veil and Gloria to help me out with my guild job. Do you think its a good idea?

The guardian looked at him.

Their arrival is too convenient. I dont want to get paranoid, but I dont want this to end up being another of the Stars games. For all I know the village might be all gone and under his control.

That was a stretch, although, sadly, it couldnt be discounted. Unless Dallion returned to Dherma, he could never be sure. On the other hand, maybe that was the entire point? The Star didnt want him in Nerosal for some reason, so there always was the danger that something might happen on the way back.

Am I overthinking this?

The nymph nodded.

So, what would be your advice?

Turning back towards the sea, the nymph reached forward. A tendril of water emerged, making its way to her hand, where it transformed into a sword. The guardian then handed it to Dallion.

Be vigilant, he said, looking at the weapon. Good advice. Moments later the weapon transformed back to water splashing over Dallion and on the floor. His immediate reaction was to take a step back, but the nymph grabbed hold of his shoulder so he couldnt. Be vigilant, but be mindful of the consequences, he added after a while.

The Guardian let him go.

Thanks.

Despite the coincidence they remained his friends, and if Dallion were to stop treating them as such, they might change as well.

Chapter 180: Stone Garden Awakening

One more! someone yelled through the room.

With a mock sigh, Veil made his way past the crowd and took the wooden bracelet he was handed. A split second later, the material of the bracelet had changed to birch.

A day ago Dallion would never have imagined Veil could be this popular; a day ago he wouldn't even have thought it possible that the blond would agree to work at an inn doing upgrades for random strangers. However, here he was, and the crowd was wild. For one thing, the female composition of the clientele had doubled since the start of his shift. Apparently, girls and a few guys, were quite eager to have items mended or improved by an exotic blond muscle house. The fact that Veil didn't miss pointing out that he was minor nobility which he was only in the most technical sense of the term only fuelled his charm. Even his sister didn't get as much attention. And then there was Dallion

For once Dallion found that there was such a thing as being too good at one's job. After some hesitation he had started the evening with a common ballad, which Nil had suggested. The piece was over a hundred years old, according to the rind library scrolls, but catchy enough to garner attention. Naturally, Dallion had added a touch of incentive for customers to be generous to his friend Veil. After all, even with Dallion pocketing the awakening trial test, the Luors still needed money for better gear namely armor. As a result, he had created a monster.

Ah. Occupational hazards, I would guess. Do you think he's enjoying it? I honestly couldn't tell.

He is. Hell just never admit it.

Meanwhile, Gloria was also enjoying a fair share of tips, again mostly from girls asking her for details about her brother. With the number of customers, she too had chipped it, taking the role of waitress. What she lacked in speed she made up with a charm of her own, not to mention that her awakened skills gave her an edge when it came to refilling, of course.

If this was what it was usually like during the festival, no wonder Hannah could keep the inn running for a year with the small number of regulars afterwards. The whole thing was like Black Friday.

Dinner was extended by one hour, then by another. At two in the morning, even Hannah was forced to ask for last orders since the food was starting to run out. One hour after that, the crowd was finally gone.

Once the last customer had left, the innkeeper and all of her employees with the exception of Aspan who never left the kitchen tidied what there was to tidy up, cleaned up, then sat down to enjoy a well-deserved feast. In total, twenty-three gold coins and three silvers had been earned, not counting

tips. The amount far exceeded anything that Dallion had imagined, making his own exploits on the first day seem ridiculously minuscule in comparison.

Eat up, Hannah said, joining them at the table. You all did well, so Aspan will cook up all the food thats left.

Now I see why you came here, Veil said, looking at the piece of gold in his hand. The only time Ive seen this much was in grandpas treasure box. I used to think it was enough to buy a village.

Depends on the village, Dallion joked. Also, its not like this usually. I get about ten-twenty silver coins per day. And no tips.

For some of the things youve pulled, I should be getting money from you, Hannah grumbled, though all in good humor. But yes, this is unusual. Having the three of you helps.

Still, a pity we didnt hear Dallion sing more, Gloria said, taking a sip of her mead.

It would have been wasted on the crowd, Hannah said, making it difficult to tell whether she was making a backhanded compliment or not. Either way, I think well keep these numbers until the end of the festival. Unlike with Dallions shenanigans, the competition wont be able to copy you two.

True. Veil nodded. Were impossible to copy.

She meant our hair. Gloria gave her brother an annoyed side-glance.

That too. Clearly, humility wasnt his strong suit.

Slowly chewing his food, Dallion looked around. Things were looking good, too good, almost. He felt at home here, having fun with friends. At this point, he couldnt ask for more, yet a voice in the back of his head whispered that this couldnt last. The Star was still out there plotting something, and he still had to become stronger and learn as much as he could as fast as possible.

Im heading to sleep. Dallion stood up.

Already? Gloria asked, a note of disappointment ringing in her voice.

Just sleep a bit in a mug or something, Veil said. The night is still young.

Nah, I need some real sleep for once. Been a long day today. Catch you in the morning? Theres something Ill need your help with.

Sissy. Veil laughed, then waved his hand. Well be here after you get your beauty sleep.

An elbow in the ribs attempted to remind him not to be so open in his ridicule. Due to Veils improved body, though, the effect was partial at best.

Have fun. He made his way to his room, then directly to bed. For once, he had no intention of training or reading up in the library.

The night proved to be uneventful. When Dallion woke up, he went through his normal routine, then went down to find that Veil and Gloria were already waiting for him. A large plate of food was also there, likely reserved for Dallion.

Did you stay up all night? Dallion asked as he took his seat.

Told you we would, Veil replied with a smirk.

We did not. Hannah just told us where we could go to get a proper bath, since the inns facilities were limited. We went there a few hours ago to avoid the crowd.

Dallion nodded. He knew of a few bathhouses in the city. The ones reserved for Awakened were so expensive that to this point he hadn't used their services, opting to wash up either at the inn or one of the city lakes. Knowing Gloria, though, she wouldn't have opted for either.

How was it?

Worse than back home, Veil replied. So, what are we doing today? Searching for another duel plaza?

I was thinking of something a bit different. The thought of Veil picking fights in plazas sent shivers down Dallion's spine. Countess emblem of no countless emblem, that was one sure way to get on the bad side of the city guard. Something down your alley.

Oh? Veil leaned forward.

Im not ruining the surprise. Dallion smiled. Also, he didn't want to give them the option to refuse.

Finishing breakfast, he led the way to Stone Gardens. There were fewer people in the streets this early. The amount of stares the Luors got, however, remained pretty much the same. Finally, they arrived on the spot.

Were here, Dallion said.

There were a few moments of silence. Gloria and Veil stood there, uncertain what to expect. For a few moments they remained still, wondering if something unexpected would happen. Then, when nothing did, Gloria spoke.

Is this some important historic spot? she asked.

You could call it that. Rather, it's work. The guild got a request to mend the area, Dallion added a note of enthusiasm as he spoke. Just mend, not improve.

His words were followed by more silence. The Luor siblings looked around, taking in the scope of the garden. In his mind Dallion could almost see them walking off in indignation, leaving only sarcastic remarks behind. There was no way he could blame them. He had pretty much done what Dallion's father used to do back on Earth: Dallion would go expecting something exciting and would end up helping clean the garage for the rest of the day. In this case, the work could well take weeks or even months.

You serious? Veil asked. This is too cool! I never thought Id get to enter an area this large! Heck it's twice as bigger than the whole of Dherma?!

Dal I really don't know what to say. Gloria said. She too seemed taken back by the offer, almost as if it were him doing them a favor. We won't forget this.

Hey, youre helping me out here. It was actually true. I havent had much experience in area awakening, so Really, Im the one thanking you.

The more he insisted, the more they thought he was doing them a favor. Ultimately Dallion decided to end the cycle of awkwardness by just getting on with it.

AREA AWAKENING

In a split second, the stone garden surrounding them was replaced by a larger version of the stone garden. This was the first time Dallion had seen an awakening realm match its real-world equivalent to such an extent. Then again, there wasnt much that could go wrong. Large stone columns extended as far as the eye could see, some rising up like massive towers piercing the sky.

You are in the land of STONE GADRENS

Defeat the guardians to change the lands destiny.

Just as in Dherma village, there were more than one of them. More interesting, though, there were a few plumes of smoke visible in the distance.

Five? Gloria turned to her brother.

More than that, he said, deep in thought. Id say more like ten. No idea where the key one would be.

Err, time out. Dallion said. Give me a few pointers on the lingo?

Sorry, Gloria said. Were talking about the number of guardians. The whole of Dherma had five. This place looks like it has more. I doubt its as many as ten, but definitely more than five. We have to defeat them all to improve the area.

Or we can just defeat the key guardian, Veil said. Thats tougher, but faster.

What if you do both?

Not sure. Havent managed before. Veil shrugged. For some reason that made Dallion let out a sigh of relief. I tried asking grandpa about it, but he didnt say much.

Defeating all guardians in a realm grants you full control of the area. In fact, if you defeat the majority of the guardians as well as the key guardian, youre also pretty much guaranteed control. Its a matter of choice, to be honest. Some local lords prefer to be aware of everything that happens in their domain. With full control you get to know quite a lot, including each time someone improves their house or when a new awakened enters their realm.

In short, they became like local deities. Dallion remembered that he had been told something similar upon arriving in Nerosal. Back then it was said that the nobles were aware of his entering the area. Now, he had a greater understanding why.

Well, lets not do any improving. This realm still belongs to the city, Dallion quickly added. Getting in trouble with the city lord wasnt among the things he wanted to do. Just mending for the moment?

Dont worry. Beil rubbed his hands. Cleaning up an area this size is more than enough.

