

Leveling up 201

Chapter 201: The Return

It was a single moment of training, but it seemed to change a great many things. While both Vend and Nil assured Dallion that advanced splitting in combat was something that even double digits werent expected to pick up immediately, he could see the difference in skill between what he was and what he wanted to be. If he were to achieve all the goals he had set out for, he had to put in more effort and stop getting distracted at every corner. Reaching so far was good, surviving the encounter with the Star was better, but Dallion still had a while to go before he could be pleased with himself. The trick was to tackle things one at a time and be consistent about it.

His relations with the Luors also went through a minor change that day. Going through two quite serious guild jobs had given them enough confidencenot that they were particularly lacking in that departmentto start going about the city on their own and not rely on Dallion to constantly be their guide. Paradoxically, Dallion felt that this new earned freedom for both had made them even closer. During their work hours, and at night, they would discuss the interesting things of the day, while giving each other space to live their own lives.

Veil had quickly transformed into the archetypical playboy older brother, with more female friends than Dallion could keep up with. Things had gotten so bador good, depending on the point of viewthat Hannah had been forced to give him two warnings about flirting at work.

Gloria, on her part, had also changed, though in the opposite way. Less carefree than her brother, she had focused on polishing her skills, as well as negotiating a few deals with minor merchants about supplies for the village. Often shed ask Hannah for advice, and on occasion Dallion as well. The difference was that when she came to Dallion for advice on various topics, Gloria would choose times when there werent too many people around. What was more, on a few of those occasions, Dallion had considered slipping the block ring on.

Youre out of focus, Vend said during one of their training sessions.

After Dallions decision to be serious about split combat training, the elite had added an echo of himself to Dallions guild ring. As a result Dallion could be informed of what was going on and then theyd cross paths in the guildhall for a few hours of instant training. The only condition that Vend had was that all training needed to be done in person. Apparently, there was something about splitting and echoes that didnt sit well with him, although he hadnt gone into details.

Just tired, Dallion lied, sitting down in the stone chair of Vends white room. I think I overdid the physical exercises last night.

Uh-huh, Vend said with the expression of someone who didnt believe him in the least, but wasnt interested enough to pry what was really going on.

Youre usually solid on three refreshes, so try to reach that at least, the elite flipped a coin. In that instant, Dallion could see his mentor splitting into three instances, each grabbing the coin mid-flight. Heads or tails?

Tails, Dallion replied.

At least your observation skills have improved. Vend summoned the coin away without even showing it. Remember. Observation, reaction, speed. Thats all you need to know.

Observation, reaction, speed it was obvious that Vend hadn't had any marketing training, otherwise he'd pick words that would make the better acronym. Ors didn't have the necessary ring to it, and still they managed to boil down the entire process in a nutshell. The issue remained that without any special inborn talent, one had to invest in all attributes in order to be really good at combat splitting. At Dallion's current level, he barely had the mental stamina to consistently maintain a set of two instances of himself for any prolonged period of time.

According to Nil, the rule of thumb was that an awakened could handle one additional instance for every ten points in mind. Having high perception helped Dallion pick his battles, and reaction allowed him to be adequate at refreshing, but everything else was utterly exhausting.

Go get some food after we're done here, Vend said. We'll try again tomorrow.

I can have another go in the evening, Dallion protested. I'm just a bit off, it's nothing that

When you're lacking focus, you're lacking focus. Ven interrupted. Spend the day doing other stuff. Actually, spend a day outside of the realms. Sometimes rushing is the best way to get slower.

Dallion smirked. That was something Nil would say. However, there was no arguing that his mentor was right. He had to get his thoughts settled. Maybe trying to level up again would help although in his current state, he wasn't sure how much good that would do.

You've been picked on a sanitation mission, Vend said. Not the usual sewer stuff. It'll be a few days until it's made official.

I get to mend a house? Dallion joked.

Actually, yes. A person of some importance has bought a run-down place in a rather valuable piece of real-estate. Knocking it down isn't an option, and despite the many issues, I'm told the foundations are good.

Pack rat again?

There'll be no packrats on this one. It'll be a small team of elites and hopefuls. Only double digits allowed.

That meant that Falkner wouldn't be on it, and neither would Gloria and Veil. In the large scope of things, that was a bonus. What Dallion thought had been an innocent infatuation was slowly developing into something more, at least on Falkner's side. Given the complexities of the situation, there was no way this was going to end well. However, that was one can of worms Dallion wasn't going to get involved in.

I guess I'm to stick close to you and do as you tell me? Dallion asked.

I won't be taking part in that one, Vend looked away. March has me on something else. Spike will be on this one, though. I've told him to keep an eye on you.

That wasn't too encouraging. Spike was the type of awakened who took any excuse to get into a fight with another guild. Technically, he wasn't breaking any city laws, since no awakened powers were used. However, that didn't excuse the thrashing he dished out and received on a nightly basis.

Will Janna and Kallan be on that one?

No, but lieutenant Jenzeem will.

Upon hearing that name, Dallion winced. Jenzeem was the lieutenant who had a thing or two against Dallions methods. Granted that Arthurows had done his best to muddy the waters, but that wasnt the only reason the lieutenant and Dallion didnt get along.

One last go? Dallion asked.

Okay.

Vend cracked his knuckles and attacked. Two instances charged towards Dallion, who split in two instances himself, each countering the incoming attack. No sooner had he done so, Dallion refreshed his instances. As expected, Vend had changed his approach, switching from a frontal attack to throwing a few knives at Dallions chest. Ranged weapons were easy to evade, thats why Dallion suspected this was just a trick. Not bothering to engage in any defense, he re-evaluated the scene.

In this instance, he was right. One instance of Vend had spun around him, while the other had charged forward, performing a saber lunge.

Observe, Vend said a few steps behind. Always observe.

Not so hot, eh? Dallion asked as he returned his weapons to their respective sheaths.

Dont expect to take days for something that requires years, Vend replied. Its all practice and repetition from here on.

With the training over, Dallion went back to the real world, where he and Vend finished their handshakes, then went along their way. It was amusing how a full training session could be hidden

in a simple handshake. That got Dallion to think what actually was going on when awakened shook hands. In the past, he thought of it as a simple greeting. Now each instance of contact was a potential meeting, training, or maybe more.

After several seconds blocking the lobby entrance, Dallion quickly went outside to the guild feast area. The familiar faces there had grown since last time. Now he knew about half of the people quite well, and some he even considered work friends.

Dal! Kallan waved from a table. Join for a bite?

Sure. Lately that was an offer Dallion couldnt refuse. Grabbing a chair, he went to the siblings table and sat down. Almost instantly, Grunt appeared out of nowhere with a platter of what appeared to be dumplings.

Hows it going? Kallan asked. Heard you had a team of your own now.

Its not a team. Its just a few friends from back home. Theyre doing fine on their own.

Mom said theyve been doing pretty well in area missions. I tried to get Estezol to get them for a mission or two. Demand is absurd. Everyone wants them on their team.

I cant imagine why. Dallion tried not to roll his eyes.

Its because theyre blond, Janna grumbled beneath her breath. Dallions music skills showed him it was an act. She too wanted to have them on her team.

Theyll be here for a while, so dont worry. Ill be sure to say a good word.

Really? Both siblings almost jumped out of their seats.

Easy there, Dallion laughed. Yeah, its not a problem. Just one mission, right? After everything that had happened, the Luors owed him that much at least.

Kallan and Janna eagerly nodded.

So whats been up with you? Any interesting artifacts?

Nah, just junk. Ive no idea where nobles are digging them out, but everyone wants to get theirs first. Guilds that didnt use to touch the stuff are now competing with us for takes.

Talk about weird market forces. Having a demand for sphere item leveling was supposed to raise prices, and briefly it had. However, item exploration had suddenly become so lucrative that everyone had jumped on board, driving prices down again. It was one of those market moves that Dallion couldnt figure out.

Anything cool to buy? Dallion asked casually.

I wish, Kallan snorted. Most of whats left for us is trash. The guilds cant keep up. Everyone is buying them out. Its impressive that the hunters can keep it up.

Mom says weve found a mother lode near the city. Thats why merchants keep pouring in. Theyll buy in bulk during the festival, then sell it off throughout the empire. Things will get better after that.

That was something to ask Jiroh and Eury once they came back. If anyone was to know, it would be them.

The food was good, the conversation sort of fun, though nothing terribly exciting. The siblings had gotten wind through their parents that Dallion was asking around about learning some forging, and promised to say a good word pending the results of Dallion's own conversations with the Luors. Dallion didn't have high hopes, but thanked them nonetheless.

After finishing his tray of dumplings, Dallion said goodbye and went back to the inn. The place was all ready for the crowd food stocked in the kitchen, and loads of tables on the outside.

I'll go rest a bit and get my mandolin, Dallion said casually and went upstairs.

Hannah mumbled something in return, while in an argument with Aspan.

No stranger than anything else in this city, I guess, Dallion replied.

You should treasure her more. Few would do the things she has.

I know. Dallion smiled. Hannah is one of a kind.

Just as Dallion was unlocking his room, there was a faint sound behind. It wasn't much something even an awakened would barely notice. Spending so much time in the inn, however, Dallion had gotten accustomed to all the sounds and the time they occurred.

Curiosity made him try to look over his shoulder. Before he could succeed, something shoved him forward into the room.

Shield! Dallion shouted out of habit as he rolled forward, then spun around, reaching for his Nox dagger.

As expected, the shield remained frozen. Moments later, so did Dallion, unable to believe his eyes of what was in front of him.

Heya, cutie. Euryale beamed, wearing a very worn set of travelling armor. You've no idea how much I've missed you.

Chapter 202: Realm Sharing

On a scale of one to a hundred, having Euryale return was undoubtedly a hundred and one when it came to surprise. Dallion's immediate reaction was surprise, followed by a sensation of warmth throughout his body. It would be a lie if he said he didn't miss her, despite everything that had occurred since the last time they were together.

The experience of them together was quite similar to last time, with one major exception they had spent it within an awakening realm. Of course, both had had their block rings on before they went there.

I thought you wouldn't be back for another week or more, Dallion said, sitting on the edge of a slab of soft rock.

The realm Eury had taken him in had certain specific properties, chief among them the ability of rocks and crystals of switching between solid and rubbery state. The brief explanation the gorgon had given was that the realm was dwarf made, but right now Dallion wasn't much interested in such information.

The rest are still wrapping up things. Since I wasn't needed, I poked them to get here faster. The snakes on the gorgon's head moved about in a wave formation, three quarters of them at any point focused at Dallion. With all the favors Jiroh owes me, this is the least she can do.

Could have gone better. Still, you take what you can get. What about you? Lots of changes, I see. Already a double digit, and with a few new toys. The Icepickers treating you well?

Yeah. As much as Dallion wanted to tell her about March's invitation and Vend being his mentor, he could not make himself do it. There was too much uncertainty there, and he wanted to enjoy her return at least a few days more. I got a new skill. He paused for dramatic effect. Forging.

Seriously? The gorgon sat up, a mixture of joy and disbelief resonating throughout her.

Very serious. The reward from passing the second gate. And of course I messed it up.

How can you mess up getting a skill? Half of Eury's snakes twisted. In his mind, he was almost certain she was forming question marks.

Sky silver hammer, Dallion replied. Upon hearing that, the gorgon's lips moved in a silent oh.

That's an innovative approach, she said, trying to keep a straight face.

I know, but there was one thing I had miscalculated. Dallion smiled. Having you away for so long.

The flattery had an instant effect, as Dallion's music skills told him. In a way, he almost felt bad having them. It almost felt like cheating when having a serious conversation with someone, especially on certain topics.

I get it, you only want me for my looks and skills, Eury said, amused. In that aspect we're quite alike. She slid her fingers through Dallion's hair. So, want a few more lessons?

You did say you'd take me as your apprentice if I got to learn forging. Well, I've learned forging.

Why don't you show me?

This was one of the moments of truth. Through everyone's life, there were many of them, sometimes thousands, or even more. A few, however, had the potential to be life-changing. Back on Earth, inviting someone to live together was such a moment. Here, there was one even greater opening: one awakened realm to someone else. Many people had warned Dallion not to do it, including one of the Seven Moons, and still he felt that with Eury he had nothing to fear.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

A doorway appeared on one of the nearby walls. The moment she saw it, the gorgon was at a loss for words. This was the first time Dallion had seen her like this, and to be honest, he kind of liked it.

Are you sure about this? Eury asked.

Very sure. Dallion stood up and started his way towards the doorway. Come on.

Hesitantly, she followed. As before, the door led to Dallion's fighting arena. The room had changed quite a bit since Dallion had been here last; it was slightly bigger, the walls were better decorated, and there were paintings of scenes from each of Dallion's awakening challenges. Looking at them, they appeared far more epic than Dallion remembered.

Not big on decorating, Eury noted. Thats nice. I love simplicity.

Yeah, Im really good at that skill. Dallion nodded several times. Its called laziness.

Eury shook her head. She didnt find the joke overly amusing, but didnt hate it either.

Passing through the reinforced door, Dallion continued along the corridor to the first room of his realm. Thankfully, he didnt meet anyone along the way. As his echo, Gen knew exactly what he was about to do, and probably made sure that the familiars and Nilespecially Nilwere in another part of the realm when Dallion connected to Euryales trinket realm.

When they both arrived, Dallion couldnt help but feel uneasy. The room he had so much pride in seemed ridiculously empty now.

Its here, he quickly went towards the anvil, hoping that wouldnt give her a chance to notice how bare the walls were. Alas, for him, gorgons had three-sixty vision and far better perception than him. There it is, Dallion pointed at the star silver hammer. I could have started with iron or tin

Or normal silver, Eury noted.

Yeah, that too. I still felt itll be better if I jumped the curve.

The gorgon stepped closer to the hammer, but didnt touch it. Dallion could feel there was some unspoken rule about visitors not meddling with someone elses awakened realm, even if invited.

I did the same when I got the skill, Eury admitted. But things were a bit different for me. My perception is a bit higher than yours. How much are you at now?

Sixteen, Dallion replied.

At sixteen you cant even see the layers properly.

Dallion didnt have the heart to tell her that at sixteen, he couldnt see the marker layers at all. While there were instances in which he could see intensityand could speculate that was caused by layers stacking up on top of each otherthat was it.

How long have you been trying to forge something?

Not much. Dallion shrugged. A few months. I doubt its more.

A few months playing with puzzles you know you cant complete. Good thing you have looks. First thing well do when we get to my workshop is to teach you how to hold a proper hammer. After that well see how things go.

Sure. No chance you can show me here?

Showing you is easy. You wont be able to learn, though. Still want to see?

Dallion nodded.

Okay. Weve got to get back to my items realm. I cant summon it here.

Instead of walking, both left Dallions realm for the real world, then entered the trinkets realm again. It was slightly confusing, but at least it beat walking. This time, there was no connection between the two realms.

Euryale summoned an anvil and an ordinary-looking hammer. Moments later, a rectangular ingot appeared on top of the anvil.

Looking at them, Dallion noticed that her forging instruments were different/ Their shape was smoother, with a lot of rounded edges.

Do you see the markers? the gorgon asked.

Nothing so far.

Give it a few moments. At low levels, it takes your mind a bit to catch on.

This was the second time he had heard it explained in such fashion. Apparently, there was no going around it he was going to have to invest in mind, or find an appropriate achievement.

The silver markers appeared several seconds later, as predicted. There were barely a dozen of them surrounding the iron ingot.

Dagger? Dallion asked, trying to decipher the instructions.

Spoon, Eury replied. Its a bit easier to handle. You dont need to worry about sharpening the edge.

The explanation meant nothing to Dallion, so he only nodded and focused on the process. The first part was pretty much the same as he had attempted himself with the sky silver ingot Eury slammed on the indicated parts with her hammer, folding the piece of metal, as it were. Hit after hit, the gorgon transformed the rectangle into a rod. Once that was done, she continued, flattening the rod to the point that the basic outline of a rather large spoon started to appear.

The size is out of proportion so you can see better, Eury explained, as she hit the top of the spoon, creating its bowl. The precision was rather impressive, everything considered. This is only the basic training process. You dont need to worry about heat and consistency with this one.

She kept on hammering until the bowl was fully formed, then summoned a pair of tongs. The moment she did a new set of markers appeared. These were very different, indicating curves on the surface of the item.

After youve given the basic shape, the adjustment phase begins, Eury explained as she continued to work. This is the annoying part, since it takes longer and you have to deal with a lot of smaller areas. A lot of repetition goes in here.

Bit by bit the same was refined to the point it started to look like a well crafted, though slightly large spoon. The neck was formed, then the rest of the handle. By the time the last marker was slammed into submission, the spoon looked like any other.

And done. The instruments disappeared from the gorgons hands. Usually the sharpening phase comes after this, but since this is a spoon, we dont have one. She reached out and took the object. There you go, she tossed it to Dallion. Think you can handle making something like this?

Dallion looked at the spoon, then turned it around. The surface was smooth, the shape perfect. Looking at her, it didnt seem one bit difficult, although he knew from experience that appearances were always deceiving.

Since youll be learning in the real world, there are a few more steps. Youll start with choosing your materials, then heating them up so you can work on them. Afterwards comes the shaping, refining, and final polish. Piece of cake, right?

If definitely sounds easy the way you explain it. Im doomed, Dallion thought.

You just have to be careful not to burn those lovely hands of yours, the gorgon flirted.

Ill do my best. Dallion tossed the spoon back to his girlfriend. The object disappeared in the air before it reached her, along with the gorgons anvil.

You better. I think you should get the hang of it in a few weeks. That will give you enough knowledge to up your skill and earn a proper hammer. Afterwards you can start training on your own and full up these empty walls.

Dallion felt uncomfortable. So, she had noticed.

Nothing to it. He tried to brush it off.

Youll have to borrow some basic model scrolls from your guild. I gave away my basic stuff, and the complex ones are way beyond your level.

Right. How much do I need to get to start working on sky silver?

Honestly? Id say you need to up your forging to forty, at least. Also, youll need to up your perception past your twenties.

In short, he was going to be effectively able to start using his hammer once he passed the next awakening gate. Not the best solution, but in the meantime he would be able to learn how to use a basic one, and maybe make some unique weapons in he process.

Leveling up, split combat, forging those were the three things Dallion had focused on. Add to them his personal relationship with Eury and the sanitation job he would still be on. As long as he could achieve progress in those areas, others would fall into place.

Suddenly, a feeling of unease went through him. As marvelous as Eurys return was, there remained the matter with Gloria. The day Dallion had dreaded was here now and there was no telling how either would react when he introduced them. Part of Dallion wanted to ask Eury to keep a low profile in front of his friends, but he knew what a disaster that would be. This wasnt high-school, and even if it were, it was no solution to the issue.

Time to go back to the real world? Dallion asked.

Must we? The gorgon tilted her head to the side. Id prefer to spend a few more hours here. At least that way I dont have to remember what a mess I am. Two weeks without a proper wash wasnt pleasant. But I guess both of us have responsibilities now.

The surroundings changed back into Dallions room.

Forgive me for using the window to get out. Seeing Hannah is not high on my list of things to do.

Got you. To be honest, Dallion wasnt thrilled in Hannah catching him with a gorgon in his room either. Just one sec before you go.

Moving to the shelf, Dallion took the stone orchid, then went to the Eury.

A little something I got for you, he offered it.

The gorgons sense of joy lit up, even if she retained her cool exterior.

A stone orchid, she said. Its been ages since Ive seen one of these. Where did you find it?

I have my ways. Dallion smiled. Nah, actually it was being used as a decoration at a stall. I spotted it thanks to my music skills.

Ah. The joy emanating from the gorgon quickly changed into disappointment. Nice catch. I cant accept it, though.

Oh?

Have you seen my place? Itll be dead in a year.

Dallion knew she was lying. As much as he wanted to press the matter, he knew he couldnt do so directly.

Ill pass by to take care of it. I have a key to your place now.

Arent you sweet? Eury ruffled his hair. Seriously, though. Better keep it here. That way Ill have something to look forward to when I sneak to visit.

Okay, but youll tell me if you change your mind.

Dont worry. When that happens, itll be the first thing I do.

Chapter 203: Job Offer

The evenings performance could have gone better. Dallions skills had reached the point that he could pretty much play anything he wantedas well as sing a catchy local song or two but his heart wasnt in it. For the most part, he was just maintaining a background melody, waiting for the night to be over. Thankfully, the inn was so bustling with people that Hannah didnt notice.

There were many mend and improvement requests, though none of them directed towards Dallion. Either way, it didnt matter. The arrangement was that the trio would split their earnings, keeping only the personal tips. And while Dallion got a single silver coin tossed his way, the rest was more than enough to compensate. Given the amount he had recently received for improving an area, money was not on his mind. If anything, he had given part of it to Veil and Gloria to help out with the expansion of Dherma.

Night came and went. After the evening feast which was quieter than normal Dallion decided to go to Eury's workshop. However, when he got there, the place was empty. The gorgon had probably set off to catch up with her own matters. Dallion toyed with the idea of leaving a note, but decided against it. Instead, he walked aimlessly through the city, sticking to the neighborhoods he knew, of course.

Still like to play it reckless? a voice said from above.

Recognizing the voice, Dallion went for his Nox dagger. His suspicions were correct. A dozen feet above, floating in the air, there was a figure. The face was unrecognizable, but the voice belonged to the person who had mugged him not too long ago.

Must be feel good to be protected. The figure floated to the ground, landing a few steps away from Dallion.

What do you want? Dallion grabbed the training dagger with his left hand. Im not as weak as before.

He knew he was bluffing. There was no way he could take on a fury with two daggers alone, not in the real world in any event. Worst of all, his music skills didnt seem to be working. There were no emotions coming from the thief, and it was questionable whether the intimidation he had put into his voice affected her at all.

Im just here to talk. The deal that the gorgon made is still in effect. Part of the payment has been made, so youre safe. Besides, its not good business to stir things up so close to the festival.

Just talk? That was a new one. Dallion didnt trust her one bit. Anyone who used trinkets to hide their face and emotions was by definition up to no good.

Talk about what?

You want to discuss it in the street? Fine by me. You never know when a guard might make an appearance, but hey, Im not the one wholl be answering questions. She floated back up. Im the one who can escape. You cant.

Entertaining the notion of talking with a criminal was the worst idea one could have. Every fiber in Dallions mindnot to mention two echoes and a guardianwere against it. Regardless, he nodded. In order to progress, this was how the game was played. Dallion didnt like the mirror pool, after his personal experience, he even despised them. However, he also knew that they were a factor in city life. As he continued to level up, they were likely to cross paths more and more. His choice was whether to make an active effort to avoid them or come to an understanding. Given how Eury and Jiroh had handled them, coming to an understanding sounded better.

Where? Dallion asked.

By the lake sounds good.

No water. Being reckless was one thing. Going close to a body of water with a shady figure of the underworld was outright suicidal.

Some park, then. Might even be the Stone Gardens for all I care.

The Stone Gardens it is, then. At least he could use the area to his advantage. Do you take me there or

Before Dallion could finish, the figure had darted through the night sky, disappearing from view. Apparently, he was going to have to walk on his own, which he did.

They can find me anywhere. If they want to talk, running away from them wont help.

Youll either be beaten up, mugged again, or made a questionable offer to be extorted later.

Not so close to the festival. If you push your luck, though, all bets are off.

Dallion regretted not having his harpsisword with him. Still, he strongly doubted anything serious would happen to him. Rather, he knew that it already had. The fact that he had caught the mirror pools eye was dangerous, and not in the adventurous fantasy sort of way.

On the entire way to the Stone Garden, Dallion kept looking around. Despite his current perception level, the thief had still managed to sneak up on him entirely unnoticed until the moment she spoke. There was a single person at the Stone Gardens when Dallion got there.

His hand on the hilt of the Nox dagger, Dallion approached.

Well? Dallion asked. What do

The thief tossed him a large copper bracelet.

Put that on? the fury said.

Whats this?

Just something to keep guardians from listening in.

I dont need it. Dallion took out his blocker ring and put it on. I have my own.

You do. The thief nodded. Thats a surprise. Didnt think youd have something of the sort with you. Where did you get it from?

Is that the topic of our conversation? Dallion tossed the copper bracelet back at the thief.

No. Ive been asked to convey a proposal.

A proposal he couldnt refuse, possibly. As usual, the echo was right, even if Dallion wished he wasnt.

Why you?

Because of what happened. One of the aristocrats thought it would be a good learning experience to have me personally get involved in this. That whole mess in Grey Harbor wasnt appreciated. We had to close the tavern down and that cost money.

We know that youre exploring items on the side, so you want help with something.

Dallion gritted his teeth. There was only one place from where they could have gotten their informationthe general. That spoiled jerk had probably bragged to someone, and now Dallion had gotten a shifty reputation in the citys underworld.

You know the guild rates, why not just ask there?

You know I really hate when people do this. Youre protected, which means I cant kill or rob you, but nothing is stopping me from beating the shit out of you. So drop the passive aggressive attitude.

It sounded like Dallion had just gotten his official warning.

Whats the proposal? he asked, a feeling of dread appearing in the pit of his stomach.

We have a single level sphere item straight from the wilderness. We want you to go in and see whats up. What you do there doesnt matter. Improve it, mend it, trash it. The thing we want to know is what it does.

That was interesting. So far Dallion had never heard of single level sphere items. The entire concept sounded like an oxymoron. And still, he couldnt kick the feeling that the job had nothing to do with the request hed just heard. The mirror pool had awakened of their own, which could easily have done the task. The conspiratorial part of Dallions brain saw that as another of the Stars plots. Since he had failed to stop him from being put on Marchs team, maybe now he was trying to get him kicked out of the guild? It was too much of a coincidence that he got the offer so soon after learning about his training mission.

Why me?

Ive no idea. For all I care you can die and rot, but the powers that be made the decision, so here we are.

Whats the catch?

No catch. Its an offer.

Dallion frowned at her.

It has to be someone outside the pool whos good at exploring and willing to work on the side. Its not a big list. Think it over.

How long do I have?

Up to the week of the festival. After that itll be considered a no.

That was it? No threats, no hints of blackmail? Dallion hadnt even gotten the are you in or out experience. This seemed like any business transaction, almost innocent in nature. What scared him was that he knew it wasnt. From the little he knew about the mirror pool, he knew they werent to be trifled with.

What do I get if I do it?

A favor, the thief replied. Let me know if youre interested.

The blink of an eye later, the fury was gone. Dallion was alone in the Stone Garden, looking blankly at the empty spot the thief had been.

How do I contact you? he asked. Only the wind replied.

Now he knew what it felt like being in a horror movie. When someone said they were always watching, they usually were using hyperbole. In the world of awakened, people were in fact doing just thatthe nobles, the mirror pool, all of them were watching everything that was going on in Nerosal as if it were a chessboard. Dallion felt like a pawn, although he had no idea which side he belonged to. Reluctantly, he removed the ring.

Im not too sure.

If you want my advice on the matter, whatever the pool has offered, dont trust them. Its always more trouble than its worth.

That much was a given.

Nil, what do you know about sphere items? I mean, really.

Well, they are considered to be remnants of the past. Its speculated that they are from the early days of the empire, or even older. What exactly is your question? You already know the basics, and everything else is the topic of decades of study.

Can they be used as a weapon?

Strangely enough, the number of spheric weapons is rather insignificant. For the most part, the artifacts dont do anything remotely useful. World items are different, but those are so rare that it isnt worth comparing them. You could say that the sphere items are junk of the ancients.

The guardians of the awakening dagger said it was a prison. They wanted me to fulfil its destiny so they could be free.

Dear boy, a lot is said about artifacts and the worlds history. There are things that are hidden, things that are kept hidden, and things we dont even know to have happened. Should you be worried that you might come across something nasty while exploring? Definitely. Should you be terrified about it? Not in the least. The four races have been finding and exploring sphere items for centuries, quite possibly longer. Even the dryad shield will confirm that. Did the fury ask you to find an artifact for her?

No.

The advice was good, but Dallion found it exceedingly difficult to follow.

Next morning, Dallion skipped breakfast and went out.

Eury wasnt in the shop the entire morning. It was close to noon that Dallion found her there, although considering the number of guards that were in the shop, he chose to not pop in. There would be time for that later during the day.

Suspensions had already started to creep in. Had Eury been to the mirror pool to keep the promise shed made to keep him safe? Quite probably. Was that connected with the request hed received? That also seemed rather likely, although Dallion felt there were other things in play.

Waiting for the day of the mission seemed like an eternity. The experience was made even more bothersome by the fact that Dallion wasn't allowed to take any other missions by then. The logic given by Estezol was that the guild didn't want to dilute his focus, which, as far as explanations went, was pretty bad.

What was more annoying, the requests from friends and acquaintances to set up the Luors to join them on jobs kept growing. Dallion, of course, had spoken with Gloria and Veil to join in on a job with Janna and Kallan. Gloria wasn't overly thrilled, but her brother accepted without a fuss. However, things didn't stop there. Falkner was particularly eager to be on a mission with Gloria, although, atypically for him, he was hesitant to ask her directly. He had gone even as far as reminding Dallion of the time he'd helped with the awakening fee. The only thing Dallion was able to do was to promise he'd talk to Gloria again on the matter, even if he suspected what the answer would be.

For some reason, Vend was also unavailable for training. Neither Nil nor Estezol knew where he was, and as for Vends own echo, it was highly evasive when asked. The only piece of advice it gave Dallion was to do his daily stiletto improvements and do some splitting training.

The only highlight of the day was when Dallion went to visit Eury, which he did in the early afternoon, when she usually woke up.

Piles of armor were stacked up on the floor, each with a cloth tag attached. All of them were in need of serious repair. In some cases, Dallion wondered why they weren't thrown out outright.

This one is completely gone, he said, looking at what was supposed to be a breastplate.

Observant, the gorgon smirked, while repairing an epaulette. And very expensive to repair. Some of the materials were difficult to come by before, which makes it nearly impossible during the festival.

Everyones going nuts with this festival thing. Is it such a big deal?

Its a day that dreams are made or broken, Eury said, then lifted the armor piece she was working on. What do you think?

Dallion looked at it using his music skills. There were some hairline cracks, though he could see no serious flaws.

Looks great.

Liar, the gorgon smiled. It'll need two more passes.

Why don't people just buy new armor? It'll be far less expensive by the sound of it.

It definitely will, but not many are willing to part with guardians they've known for decades. Theres something special with the first armorpeople build a relationship with it. And Im not talking about companion equipment. Several of her snakes stretched in Dallions directionthe gorgon equivalent of a stern look.

Right.

That made sense. In the world of awakened, sentimental value was a real thing. To a degree, it was like having a treasured pet. Of course, people would be willing to spend vast amounts of money to have them brought back to full health. Dallion himself had a close relationship with his

harpsisword, shield, and familiars. Normal guardians he viewed more as acquaintances, or work colleagues.

Thats one of the most difficult parts of being a forger, the gorgon went on, making a few more adjustments to the epaulette. Giving away something youve created. Its the same for other crafters as well, but its forgers that have it the hardest.

As hard as he tried, Dallion still couldnt grasp the meaning behind the words. The phrase giving away your babies came to mind, although that too was just a set of words. Hopefully, soon hed find out.

Ill be going on a sanitation mission tomorrow, he said. Its supposedly a big deal.

But?

But its just mending a house. Its nothing exciting and I wont get any level increases from it.

Thats not whats worrying you, is it? A large cluster of snakes turned Dallions direction. With the perception she had, she could probably see his emotions as easily as Dallion using his music skills.

Just the usual fears of messing up. Its not like the party lead has it in for me or anything. He went to a nearby set of armor, pretending to examine it. I guess Im just worried not to mess up.

If youre worried, you definitely will, Eury replied in her most charming fashion. If youre not you wont.

The desire for her to hug him vibrated loud enough for Dallion to sense thanks to his skills: there was a deep intention to show support, but also a fear not to hurt his pride. No question about it, Dallions ability to read emotions even in the real world had improved quite a bit.

I know, Im just venting. Dallion put out a brave front. Its the job that comes after this thats really important.

A job you cant talk about?

Im not sure. Its a bit complicated As much as he wanted to ask her, he didnt want to do it in a room full of guardians. Maybe sometime when they had their blocking rings, he would. So, when will you start training me in the ways of forging?

I know you only have two eyes, but youve probably seen how much work I have to catch up with. Going hunting for a week does that. And dont even get me started about the mess with the guard.

The guard? Curiosity sparked inside Dallion.

There are always bound to be problems in a city this big, but lately things have started to get strange. Normally theyd sweep it under the rug, but with the countess arriving for the festival, its all hands on deck.

Anything you can talk about?

Its complicated, the gorgon mocked. Its hunter stuff. Nothing for you to worry about. It only affects black market stuff.

Smuggling? Dallion pressed on. Anything to do with the mirror pool?

Dal, youre cute, but youre really clueless about these sorts of things. The less you get involved, the better. Her tone was warm, but firm. There was real concern there. All I can say is dont go exploring shady items on the side. But since its you, I know you wont.

There was something dangerous in exploring items? That would explain the recent offer coming from the mirror pool. If things were happening during item exploration, they werent going to risk their own investigation. Given their dislike of Dallion, there was only one thing he could come up with some of the items were infected with chainlings. If the city guard was involved, it wouldnt be a stretch to assume that a few awakened had been found dead or in a non-responsive state.

Nil, know anything on the matter?

You mean like when a few of our scouts got lost in an item? Or when I had my encounter with the Star?

That shut up Nil pretty fast. For several seconds there was no response. Finally, the echo brought himself to continue.

I thought semi-awakened couldnt explore items.

Normally they dont, but since theyre cheap labor, some less scrupulous guilds and individuals bring them along as packrats. As the gorgon said, you have nothing to worry about. Guild items undergo testing before members are assigned jobs in them. And even in the unlikely scenario that something should happen, we take care of our own.

While true, that didnt paint a pretty picture. Up till now, Dallion didnt even think about it, but now that he had an arrangement with the general, and was also approached by the mirror pool, he was going to look into it.

Pouting doesnt suit you, Euryale said.

Huh? Oh, its not that. Was having an argument with Nil about something.

Ah. The gorgons attitude quickly changed. I can empathize. I used to have those a lot until one day I decided not to.

Dallion stared at her.

I unlinked all my items. Arguing with them all the time just wasn't for me. As they say, to each their own. What do you think now? She held up the epaulette.

To be honest I can't see the difference.

At that, the gorgon chuckled. Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it in a few months. She put the item on her workbench. About that mission. Do you need anything? Weapons, armor, something else?

I think I'm good. I already have your blossom armor. Even if he didn't know how to adequately use it yet. Why? Have something in mind?

As a matter of fact Euryale went to the bedroom. Shortly later, she emerged, holding what looked like a sky silver chain. Quite delicate, it resembled a piece of jewelry. A little something, I picked up for you.

A necklace? Dallion didn't know how to react.

Wow, you've really improved your perception. Euryale shook her head. It's something that will keep you a bit safer.

The chain felt unusually heavy for its size. Dallion felt it in his hand. When he put it around his neck, the weight seemed to disappear.

Thanks. What does it do?

Hopefully you'll never have to find out. Her expression was jokey, but Dallion's music skills told him she was deadly serious.

Any comment, Nil?

There's little I can say without you exploring its realm. At this point better do as she says. I don't see any downside.

The conversation devolved to jabs and jokes, after which Dallion was chased out so she could get back to her work. The only thing left for him was to go get back to the Gremlins Timepiece and train a bit on his singing for the evening's shift.

The night passed like a flash. There was no telling where Dallion's mind was, but it definitely wasn't in what he was doing. He wasn't even focused on the incidents that had been affecting awakened, or at least not entirely. The thing Dallion was most concerned about was the sanitation mission, specifically how he would get along with the lieutenant.

In theory, there was nothing for him to be concerned about the guild was set up so as to help their members achieve their goals. After all, the order to include him had come from March, and Dallion could rest assured that Adzorg was also supporting him. Even so, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was nastiness to come. From his experience back on Earth, when things started on the wrong foot, it was always long and painful to return to normal relations.

Even after he went to bed, Dallion kept delving into the thought.

What exactly is worrying you?

Its just that

Thinking about it, Dallion wasnt able to pinpoint anything. Rather, it was a general feeling of unease associated with the upcoming job. He knew he had to make a good performance, but that was only part of it. And on further thought, it wasnt the lieutenant either at least not entirely.

Go ahead if you feel like it. As long as it puts your mind at ease, theres nothing wrong in doing so.

A blink of an eye later, morning had arrived.

Chapter 205: The Gilion House

The guildhall was mostly empty when Dallion arrived. Estezol was absent for once, making everything else look out of place. Spike was there, along with a few other members of the party. The lieutenant, for whatever reason, wasnt. That made Dallion feel anxious.

Youre early, Spike joked. Dallion could see enthusiasm and aggression ring through him. He was looking forward to the job and was hoping there would be a lot of fighting as well.

I am? Dallion looked at the other people involved.

There were three other people there excluding Spike, none of them lieutenant Jenzeen, thankfully. Some of the people he had seen on occasion, while others remained unknown. All of them were wearing light armor of sky silver, making Dallion rethink his decision of rejecting Eurys offer. Apparently, the gorgon knew more on the subject, yet again.

The weapons the group were equipped with were rather simple, ranging from daggers to short swords. No one seemed to have a shield, or any large ranged weapons for that matter. Thinking about it, it made a lot of sense their job was to mend the realm, not cause further damage. Of course, that means that the whole endeavor would be that much more difficult.

Better be careful with that. The only female member of the group pointed at Dallions harpsisword. Long weapons arent good for fighting in such jobs. Too slow to move about.

Hell be fine, Spike said. Vend has probably taught him everything there is about splitting.

Dallion felt a lump in his throat. If only it were true. It was safe to say that he had taken his first few steps along the path of proper combat splitting, not to mention that his level remained rather low to be efficient.

Ill be using it for music, Dallion said. The doubt in the woman subsided, though didnt disappear altogether. Apparently, the lieutenant wasnt the only one questioning him about joining the mission. Thankfully, of the remaining three members, two were glad for the support probably relieved they werent the junior member anymore. The last a large man with long greying hair didnt seem to care in the least.

Thats Alera, by the way, Spike introduced the woman. Scout, when she actually tries.

The woman glared at Spike, but said nothing.

Hi, Im Dal. Dallion smiled.

Everyone knows who you are, the old man in the group said. And why youre here. If you ask me, its a bad idea.

You dont think Ill be able to keep up? Dallions ego kicked in.

I dont think its safe for you. This isnt your typical sanitation mission. This is a full house reconstruction. Cracks aren't the only nasty things that lurk in a realm. There are other things as well.

Chainlings? Dallion whispered.

Whoa, no need to get that excited, Spike laughed. Sometimes I wish they were chainlings. Theyre less strong, but more annoying. Moldlings, rusties, and the like. Youll see a lot of them. Will be good practice for your next mission.

Provided he manages to survive until then, lieutenant Jenzeen appeared round the corner, along with a short woman. Both were wearing full plate armor, making the lieutenant look like a scare-crow in a horror movie. Dallion could tell that the suit of armor was close to flawless, but it definitely didnt suit him aesthetically. Done with introductions? Good, because its time to go.

One minute in and Dallion already didnt like this mission.

After a quick check, the group set on their way. Initially, Dallion had no idea where the house in question would be. When they reached the neighborhood, he could hardly believe his eyes. This was the very same area on which the general lived. To have a building here that needed repairing meant that no one had bothered with it for a while.

Thats the one, the lieutenant pointed to a rather cute three-story building. From the outside there didnt seem anything wrong with it. Sure, the plants were a bit overgrown, and the cleanliness wasnt the best, but as far as anyone could see, there were no visible cracks or holes.

Looks pretty okay to me, Dallion ventured an opinion, only to get a few smirks.

Newbie mistake, Spike said. Wait till we get inside.

Moments later, Dallion found out exactly what the others had in mind. As the door opened, a whiff of stale air overloaded his senses, almost making him puke on the spot.

What the heck?! Dallion covered his nose and mouth with his arm.

Youve never been on one?

Dear boy, Im a researcher. I dont go to sanitation missions, or exploration missions, for that matter. My purpose is to analyze and construct realms for the benefit of the guild.

That explained so much, including why he was so obsessed with theoretical knowledge.

I would have you know that during my research, I have defeated more guardians than most in the guild. Not that vandals such as March would appreciate that.

Better step back, Alera said, pulling Dallion back by the shoulder. It takes a while to get used to it.

What is that stuff? His eyes had started to tear up at the stench.

Depends. If were lucky, a dead animal of some sort. If were not, some kind of nasty plant has made its way into the walls and foundations.

Which makes our work more difficult, the old man sighed. We dont only have to get everything in the realm in order, but clean the house as well. Always annoying.

We have to clean up too? Dallion didnt like the sound of that.

What did you expect? the lieutenant asked. Our job is to get it suitable for living, and that includes some cleaning.

Let me guess thats the newbies job.

Are you trying to sound stupid? the man crossed his arms. The guilds reputation is at stake on such jobs. I wont let it be ruined by some temp whos only here to get experience. Well do the cleaning. Youll be the one carrying it out of the house.

The stench was considerably worse inside, although after a while Dallions senses got used to it. Going through the floors, a few rat nests were quickly found, though unfortunately, they werent the source of the smell. As it turned out the old man was rightthe entire basement floor was covered in a sort of vine-moss that had dug deep into the base of the walls. Spike tried cutting off a piece, only to reveal small root-like tendrils going into the walls, creating dozens of small punctures in the process.

Alright, we know what the situation is, so lets get to it, the lieutenant said. Hacky, anything we should know about on the upper floors? he shouted.

Roof is fine, the reply came. Nothing I saw in any of the attics. Theres wall space missing, though, so who knows.

Okay, were assuming everything is okay upstairs and start from here, Jenzeen cracked his neck, then extended his arm. Grab hold.

Without hesitation, everyone took hold of an exposed part of the lieutenants skin.

AREA AWAKENING

A green rectangle appeared, quickly replaced by a blue one.

You are in the land of GILION HOUSE.

Defeat the guardians to change the lands destiny.

Despite Dallions fears, the smell was much more tolerable here than above. In fact, the realm looked nothing like the house they had been in a moment ago. Endless planes of bricks stretched into the distance. Every now and again there would be a forest or a small mountain, but most of all, there were a lot of reed bogs.

Threads of hostility surrounded him, visible like venomous blue strands in the air. It didnt take long for Dallion to pinpoint the source of themthe bogs, or rather something hidden beneath the swampy surface.

How do you want it? Spike asked. Splitting up or slow and steady?

"Slow and steady for now. When we clean the ground floor, well tackle the rest separately," the lieutenant said.

Where is the rest? Dallion asked. In his experience, a realm was pretty much a representation of what the area was. However, this one had nothing in common. He could understand that the swamps were probably the plant, and likely had cracks hiding in them, but there was no sign of anything he would call a key point structure representing the other floors.

In the distance, Alera replied. You cant see it because of the mist.

Given that Dallions perception was at sixteen, he thought he would at least be able to spot that. The air seemed perfectly clear and there was nothing of significance in the distance in any direction. For several seconds Dallion kept staring at the horizon, hoping that something would pop out.

Instead, he received a pat on the back.

You cant see it, one of the party members said. Thats part of the trick. We need to clean the swamps first.

You mean drain the swamps? Dallion said with hope.

He means destroy the swamps, the lieutenant said. No swamps, no mist. You get the idea.

Sure. Dallion nodded.

Alas, dear boy, that is an area Im not well-versed in. Youll have to find out by yourself.

It took less than a minute for the party to determine with which swamp to start. The process seemed a complete mysterythe lieutenant seemed to point at a certain spot only to receive a nod or a head shake from Alara. Once the decision was made, everyone went in that direction without question.

Be careful where you step, Spike whispered to Dallion. Most of the nasties like to bite the ankles. If they get you, you'll have smelly feet for days.

Right, Dallion laughed.

Dear boy, what did you expect? Your music can affect the way someone feels. Cracks can cause items to crack and chip. Why shouldn't things be able to affect you?

Good question. The only answer Dallion could think of was that nothing of the sort had happened before. Rather, almost nothing. The chainlings were able to affect awakened, and there was the thing about sphere items causing people to die. Once again, Dallion found that he had been leading a sheltered life. At least now he knew why March had sent him on this job—what better way to learn the effects than experience them himself.

Honestly, it's really rare for you to stumble upon something of the sort. The only reason I know is because of my research.

A specific job that affected people in real life. One didn't have to be a detective to see that similar things awaited Dallion in the World Item.

COMBAT INITIATED

Red rectangles suddenly flashed all around them. Instantly, everyone summoned their weapons.

Form a circle! the lieutenant ordered. Newbie, you stay on the inside!

Dallion obeyed, summoning his dartbow.

Don't use that, Spike said, holding two cleavers. Bolts only make a mess of things. He pushed Dallion further back. Don't get any of the pus on your skin.

Chapter 206: Ticks and Cracklings

Giant blob-like ticks charged at the party.

Species: Splash Tick

Class: Crippled Star

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

- **Corrosive Bite**

- **Corrosive Pop**

Weak spot: Head

Just looking at them made Dallions stomach churn. It was like watching a large squishy water balloon with legs and a hardened pin of a head on top. Only one emotion rang through them a deep desire to destroy everything and anyone.

A knife split the air, hitting one of the creatures in its blobby body. The Tick burst with a pop, splashing everything around it with greenish yellow liquid. Even from this distance Dallion could sense the acid smell among the bouquet of disgusting odors.

Corroders, the lieutenant said. Immediately, everyone in the party unsummoned their armor.

And thats why you dont use ranged against them, Alera told Dallion. You might get a few of them from a distance, but when they get close, things get messy.

Dallion nodded.

Ill try to slow them down with music, Dallion shouted, gripping his harpsisword.

Speed is not the issue, the lieutenant said. Make them dizzy instead.

That was a novel suggestion, but quite good. The issue with the ticks wasnt the speed even slow, they would slowly advance towards the party en masse, then start biting what they could it was precision. A dizzy tick wouldnt be able to attack, allowing the awakened to kill them off in an efficient manner.

Dizziness

, Dallion said to himself as he played the corresponding chords, synching with the attacking creatures. The melody vibrated loudly, immediately affecting the front rows of ticks, then moving further on. Of course, the effect was only temporary. Not wasting any time, Dallion played a second chord.

Familiar with the method of creating states and emotions, he didnt even have to look at the music markers as he played. He had gone a long way since he started learning music a while back, but he felt it wasnt nearly enough. The more complicated the tasks, the stronger the enemies he was facing, and it was no longer possible to simply freeze them as he did to low-level guardians.

Not bad. Spike grinned. According to the emotions within him, he was more amused than impressed, but at this point Dallion was willing to take that as a compliment. Being among elites made him feel quite out of place, and by the looks of it, with good reason.

As expected, Spike was the first to attack, slashing off the heads of several ticks with one strike. The precision was such that it instantly killed the creatures, not giving them a chance to splash their contents on anything. Moments later, the rest of the party joined in.

Very soon, it became clear why all of them were only equipped with short weapons. Anything longer would have made fighting in a cluster much more difficult, not to mention it risked killing a tick by accident. Only the removal of the armor didnt make sense, but Dallion decided to ask that at a later point. For now, he had to focus on his music.

Any chance you can make them fall asleep? one of the younger members asked. He was a skinny guy with long black hair tied in a braid. Unlike most of the other party members, he was only able to take out two ticks at a time and even that with difficulty.

Stick to dizziness! the lieutenant barked. It seemed that Dallion wasn't the only person he had a thing against.

The sea of ticks slowly surrounded the group. No attempt was made to avoid or even delay the process. On the contrary, the people specifically waited for that to happen, even slowly moving towards the thick of the enemies.

Rows of ticks poofed out of existence every second, barely making a dent in the overall numbers.

Dal, get ready! The lieutenant shouted. Once I give the order, cocoon yourself in your shield. After that, don't come out until someone taps twice on it.

Sure. That was very specific.

Hes way old to be a

Now! the lieutenant shouted.

Within seconds, all members, with the exception of Dallion, dashed forward, leaving a line of destruction in their wake. Rather, it wasn't a line of destruction, it was lines of emptiness, like a vacuum cleaner passing over a floor covered in dust. In the moments before enveloping himself with the armadil shield, Dallion managed to get a glimpse of the attack style they used. It was very similar to the zig-zag method he had learned from Janna and Kallan, but significantly more sophisticated. What was more, each of them wasn't going a simple run, they were doing a split run. Dallion could see five instances of each reaving through the ticks. In each case, it was the best outcome that was selected.

Shield! Dallion said. Before he could see more, the shield formed a sphere around him, protecting him from any potential harm.

Indeed, dear boy. An elite is a very good expert whos had decades to develop enough tricks for the battlefield. Sometimes centuries. Thats not what a party leader is, though. A lieutenant, and a captain for that matter, is someone who could command their party in a way that would maximize their efficiency. There are many different styles, but the outcome is roughly the same. That is why youd often see elites with far greater skills than their party leaders, even in the city guard, or the Imperial Army.

Waiting silently in the shield, Dallion counted the seconds. Ten seconds in, the sound of fighting intensified. He could hear the lieutenant barking orders to direct the party members about. Another ten seconds later, the yells sounded a lot closer than before. Shortly after, there was silence.

Holding his breath, Dallion counted to five, then to ten, then to twenty. All that time, there wasn't a sound to be heard.

Just as Dallion was about to order the shield to return to normal, the two taps sounded as if someone was knocking on the surface.

Shield, Dallion whispered. The guardian obeyed, opening up and contracting to its original form.

Welcome back, Spike said.

There was no trace of the ticks. Not only that, but Dallion saw that the air tendrils had diminished. Looking at the horizon, however, there was no change, suggesting that the mist was still present. The lieutenant and several of the party members had gathered around one of the newbies, who seemed to have half a trouser missing.

Do you need to stop? The lieutenant asked.

The other didnt reply.

What happened? Dallion whispered.

Skiv got in a bit of a mess, Spike replied. A tick bit him, then burst. Nasty thing. The pain will last for weeks and will need serious treatment. He wont be able to take on big jobs for a while.

That serious?

Nasty stuff. But hey, its the life of an explorer. Beats being an item mender.

As harsh as it sounded, there was truth to that. Even Dallion had no intention of going back to standard mending.

Theres no way to heal him?

Not if you know any magic, Spike snorted.

Ill make it, the guild member groaned. I just need a bit of rest.

You dont look like you just need rest, Alera said. Get out of here. Well take you to the guild once were done.

I can heal him, Dallion said.

At that moment, all eyes turned towards him. There were elements of confusion in the people, along with curiosity, but for the most part, there was universal disbelief. If healing involved magic, it had to be a pretty big deal. Dallion knew as much from the cleric hed seen during the chainling hunt.

Its not magic, Dallion quickly said. I have a familiar that can do it.

There was another long moment of silence.

Show me, the lieutenant said.

The firebird appeared on Dallions head. Happy like a chick that got a chance to fly out of its cage, it chirped several times, then looked at the people nearby with almost as much interest as they were looking at it.

Thats Lux, Dallion explained. Hes a healing firebird?

That can heal? the old man in the group asked.

It can restore health for certain. Dallion tried to grab Lux from his head, but his hand only passed through the blue flame. The firebird seemed rather amused by it. Never tried it on something like that. I guess its worth a test? Whats the worst that could happen?

I guess theres no harm, the lieutenant had to admit. Are you up for it, Skiv?

The other nodded eagerly. From his perspective, anything was better than remaining in this state.

Lux, go on his leg, Dallion said out loud. If anything feels off

Before he could finish, the bird had zoomed from Dallions head onto the woundeds leg. Clearly the firebird was reckless as its owner, in its own unique way. Blue flames surrounded the entire affected area of the leg.

For several seconds, nothing happened. Normally this was the point at which a red rectangle would appear, making it known that five percent health had been restored. While that did happen, it was also accompanied by a sudden browning of an area of Skivs leg. Green fumes went up along with a distinctly sour smell of rot.

Lux, get Dallion began, but was quickly interrupted by the lieutenant.

Not yet.

Looking closely, Dallion saw what the other meantthe area was slowly shrinking. What Lux was doing was effectively pull the corrosive substance out of Skivs leg and burning it away. It wasnt the fastest process, and quite smelly, but it managed to do something which was otherwise considered impossible.

None of the guild members said a word, but Dallion could see awe vibrate inside them. For once, even the lieutenant was impressed.

Everyone, rest up for another ten minutes. The lieutenant looked at the size of the infected area on Skivs leg. Make that fifteen. Well tackle the swamp afterwards. Dal, he added as the rest started walking away. You stay.

In Dallions experience, being asked to stay behind meant either something good or something very bad. Considering the circumstances and the emotions he could see in the lieutenant, it was possible to go either way.

How did you get it? the lieutenant whispered.

It happened during the Art incident. I guess somehow he changed a firebird guardian into

Im not asking where, Im asking how.

Dallion remained silent, not understanding the question.

There are four people in the entire guild with familiars. Half of them received them as an inheritance from a family member. The rest got them from birth. You didnt have it before, and I doubt you inherited it, so Im asking again. How did you get a familiar?

It just happened? Dallion replied. After I defeated the guardian, a blue rectangle appeared and told me that I had an azure firebird. Thats it.

The lieutenant glared at him.

Thats all that happened. If I knew how I did it, Id have gotten a few more to help me in combat. And not only there.

You really have no idea, do you?

Idea of what? I know its not that rare for an awakened to have a familiar. Some even have more. Captain Adzorg even said that

Its normal for the Archdukes city, or Imperial capital. Just look at Skiv.

The mans leg was all but healed. Nothing more than two large brown pimples remained and even they were quickly fading away beneath the blue flames.

Only magic can do that.

Dont worry, I dont have any magic.

I know, but the familiar does, and when people find out, therell be many more questions coming your way, including from people that wont accept the answer youve giving.

Chapter 207: Bog Attack

Not even a prick wound remained after Luxs treatment of Skiv. If anything, the missing trouser leg was the only lasting damage. The man stood up and walked around just to make sure. Everything was in perfect order.

The firebird chickwhich had never gotten so much attention until nowcheerfully zipped from person to person at speeds that made it almost seem like it was teleporting. Each time, it would get a few pats on the head, or as close as one could achieve when attempting to bat a flame, before chirping to its next victim. Dallions initial attempts to get the familiar to behave fell on deaf ears, to the point that even the lieutenant sympathized with the situation.

Finally, after Dallion raised his voice mentally, the firebird poofed into his awakening realm, where it got a meowy scolding from Nox.

Ready? the lieutenant asked.

Which one do we go for? Alera asked.

We start with the closest, then see how things go from there.

Without complaint, the party started moving. It didnt take long to get to the edge of the bog. The experience was unlike anything Dallion had seen. As they walked, the brick ground became soft, then outright soggy with the consistency of wet clayor as the more experienced guild members called it wet land.

At this point, Alera took the lead, setting the path for the rest to follow. As much as Dallion focused, neither his current perception nor his music skills helped him see any difference in the surrounding terrain. However, he was pretty certain it would be a bad idea to venture off the invisible path set by the others.

Suddenly, Nox let out a low hiss in his realm.

Cracklings, Dallion said instinctively.

You sure? the old man who was in front of him asked.

My familiar can feel them, Dallion said without going into detail which familiar he was talking about. They are either near or they are big.

Alera? the lieutenant asked. See anything?

Nope, but that isnt a guarantee. The woman replied. Centers a few miles off. They can be hiding somewhere.

Cracklings in a rust drain. Been a while since weve seen that, Spike commented. Sounds like fun.

You dont know what the word means, the second woman said with a sigh. Her voice was unusually high for her body, giving the impression that she could shatter glass just by laughing. I think we have a burrower.

Whats a burrower? Dallion asked.

A burrower is a nasty symbiosis of stench and corrosion, the lieutenant explained. Cracklings do the damage and prepare the ground, then the stinkers move in. They know not to mess with each other, but if something like us appears, they are sure to react, sometimes even join forces. Were very lucky that the creatures in the house remained wild. Otherwise we might be looking at a few weeks of cleaning.

Weeks? That was far longer than Dallion had ever been in a realm, although if Veil and Gloria hadnt appeared to help him, it might well have taken him that long.

As the party explained some of the details, Dallion got to know a new side of area realms. Often, especially with abandoned areas, the destructive creatures tended to evolve. Given enough time they didnt stop at villages, but created small towns, potentially even cities. Destroying old rot at times was the equivalent of sieging, infiltrating, or otherwise sabotaging a fortified castle with the specific goal of destroying the main source of damage or corruption.

From a certain aspect, the awakened took the role of horsemen of the apocalypse, bent on destroying everything there is and purging the realm of all existence. Dallion knew very little about crackling society, as did most people hed asked, including Nil, but it still somehow felt as if the awakened ones were the evil ones here. True, they were helping the area guardians from being destroyed, but did that make it right? Surely there had to be another wayit was through that way that Dallion had made Nox his familiar. Back in the well, nothing stopped him from killing the small cub there and then. Showing a bit of kindness had proved a far better approach for everyone, including the Well guardian.

After another few hundred feet, Nox let out a loud warning meow, making Dallion stop in his tracks.

Its close, Dallion said.

There. He pointed to the area in question. Deep underneath.

Are you sure? Spike asked.

No, but I see more emotions in that spot, none of them positive.

Were still way off the center, Alera said. Maybe a group has clustered off?

Or maybe the place is large enough to have several burrowers, the lieutenant mused. June, are you up for a go? he turned to the woman clad in armor. She was the only one who had re-summoned her equipment since the tick encounter. Most of the rest had only bothered to get better boots and foot guards.

Well be tipping our hand if were wrong. Dal, how certain are you?

Ninety percent, Dal said, although in his mind he was thinking fifty-fifty.

You better be right about this. The woman narrowed her eyes. Her emotions screamed that she would be very upset at him if he messed this up. Ale, any good spots?

Yeah, give me a moment. Alera took a few steps to the side. A set of green markers appeared around her. Should be safe here.

Make a circle, the lieutenant ordered. June, do your thing.

Pieces of armor and other gear appeared on the party members as they got into position. As before, Dallion was left in the center, safely surrounded by his teammates.

Need any support? he asked, holding his harpsisword. I can boost as well.

No, the lieutenant replied instead of June. Save it for the cracklings. If they appear, I want you to slow them down. If its something else, make them dizzy.

Got it. So those were the two status effects that were most efficient good to know.

June slowly made her way to the suspected spot of cracklings. At every step, she sank a few inches. Soon, the bog was to her waist, and still she kept on walking as if nothing had happened. Whatever her body level was, it had to be impressive.

Reaching into the air, the woman summoned a set of large curved daggers the likes of which Dallion had never seen before. The closest thing he could compare them to were scythe heads, only twisted around their axis.

Now that was useful. Dallions first thought was whether he could learn arts as well. His second was that Eury had that set of skills as well. Combined with her perception and other skills that made her far stronger than she had let on. No wonder she had managed to scare off a whole tavern or mirror pool members. The question was, how strong was she really? Considering that high-ranking officers of the city guard went to her for advice, her skills had to be significant.

COMBAT INITIATED

The red rectangle appeared, letting everyone know that Dallion was right. Part of the swamp surged forward, giving birth to a snakelike creature that rose ten meters into the air. It was the second tallest crackling Dallion had seen so far, and definitely the most disgusting. Rows of teeth extended along its body all the way from the creatures top to the area still submerged beneath the surface.

Sluggo, Spike said with the cheerful intonation of someone who had returned home to his pet dog. This really is a treat.

Its a leech. Alara turned to Dallion. The crackling is a leech. Normally they are harmless, but when they get this big they get complicated.

Shouldnt we help her? Dallion asked.

Shes fine, Spike said dismissively. Its a small one. Were here if something else shows up during the fight or after it.

On her part, June didnt wait. Gripping both daggers, she dashed up along the body of the crackling via a series of leaps. It was obvious that she was combining athletics and acrobatics, and that was just the beginning. Several jumps in, the knives cut into the creatures body, ripping it up like a knife through a sheet of paper. Cutting through teeth and flesh, June made her way to the very head of the crackling, avoiding all of its mouths and emerging tendrils.

Eyes popped open all over the creatures body in an attempt to better target the woman, but to no avail. Reaching the top, June did a somersault, then falling down the other side stuck the daggers in the crackling again, using them to rip what was left of it in two.

In his mind, Dallion could almost hear the ripping sound.

Steady, the lieutenant whispered. If there's a counter it will be now.

As June landed back in the bog, half of the serpent-like crackling slid off of it like the peel off a banana. The woman didnt stop there, though, now slicing at the base of what was left with a series of arc attacks. The speed was so great that Dallion could barely follow.

June? Late twenties. Its difficult to keep track. Most of our elites are overachievers, which makes the guild an interesting place.

If Dallion had faced the echo of his grandfather at level twenty-one, it was almost certain he would have never won. In fact, he doubted he could win against his own echo at that level.

Yes and no. They have strong members, of course, but its more a numbers game there. The strong apply to strong guilds. People of good standing, such of noble families, and so on. Were different. We pick everyone up, even those whove come here to get away from it all, orespeciallythose who had something to prove.

Precisely. And thats why I keep telling you not to worry so much. Despite what everyone says, youre been accepted as one of us. From here on, its all about learning how to maximize your potential.

The second half of the crackling splashed into the bog, bursting into a shoal of fishlike entities as it did. The hard part of the battle was over. From here on, it was only a matter of picking them one after the other. And this was precisely the moment at which the lieutenants prediction came true.

As the cracklings started fleeing, a whole area of the swamp rose up, transforming into a series of black mosquito-like insects. The effect was so sudden, that for a second the brick ground beneath the bog became visible, before quickly being filled in.

Thats our cue. Spike summoned his weapons.

Chapter 208: Elite Combat

June, leave the cracks! The lieutenant shouted as swarms of mosquitoes flew down on the party.

Even with the speed of the elites, dealing with the creatures was difficult. There had been several bites so far all minor wounds and they were starting to stack up. Dallion had offered to have Lux help out, but the lieutenant had forbidden it, stating that it was better to leave that for after the fight than risk something harming the familiar.

Theyre getting away! the woman shouted back. For the last minute she had been focusing on thinning the shoal of fish. If I dont get them here, theyll merge with another burrower group.

Well deal with them later! Focus on the swamp!

The phrase still sounded weird, but was a valid description of everything going on. What was bog transformed, patch by patch, into a swarm of insects intent on eliminating the awakened party. Under this intense pressure, Dallion had doubled the tempo of his playing and started to sing as

well, just so he could keep up. His music senses showed him that his efforts were having an effect, but he didn't feel it. As far as an observer was concerned, the party might as well be fighting in a hailstorm.

It's thinning, Spike said, slicing waves of insects in the air. On this occasion, he was the one that had suffered the most damage, having his health pretty much halved.

Instinctively, Dallion looked up. Alas, there was no indication of any changes. The swarm was so large that it completely blotted out the sky.

Not up, Alera said, seeing Dallion's reaction. Down.

It took a few moments for Dallion to realize what was being said. When he did, though, he looked at his feet. To his surprise, the bog had significantly subsided. Now it was at about puddle depth, going up an inch up the sole of his boots. Even June, who had been up to the waist in much until recently, had bog up to her ankle.

Hang in there a few more minutes, the old man said to Dallion. And keep that music going.

June! the lieutenant shouted again. I need you to jump.

A flash of resentment radiated in the woman's chest. She didn't want to stop her previous task. Even so, she obeyed, turning around and starting her dash towards the party. At that point, the party position shifted again. The old man let go of his weapons, his area taken over by his neighbors, Alera and Spike. When June got there, she didn't slow down, running into the old man instead. Prepared, he interwove his hands, then gave her a boost upwards.

June rose in the air, spinning as she did, like a deadly top. With speed and precision expected of her, she drilled through the cloud of insects, creating a chimney like tunnel. Then, when June reached the top, the process repeated only this time with her falling down.

Someone with the skills of a captain? Dallion was definitely going to ask about that, if not in person, he had Vend and Estezols echo to talk with.

Second jumper! the lieutenant ordered. Skiv?

Got it! Similar to June, he too got posted up into the air.

His method was very different from June's. Not nearly as flashy, he relied on a set of rather large weapons—the closest thing Dallion could compare them to were rake heads—to make up for his lack of speed and precision.

After a while of being mesmerized by the aerial performance, Dallion looked back at the ground. The muck had all gone, revealing the brick ground. It was as if someone had drained the bog in the area and cleaned all the mud that was left. Back on Earth, that would have been the dream of every janitor. In this world, the muck itself was the creatures which in turn were the embodiment of filth.

The fight continued for several minutes more, just as the man had said. After a while the roles changed each member of the party broke out, starting to specifically hunt smaller swarms of insects, with only Spike remaining so as to protect Dallion.

Im at a third, Alera shouted. Need some help here.

Im down to twenty percent, Spike shouted back. Get someone else! He then turned to Dallion. Dont worry, Ive been at ten many times. Itll be fine.

Somehow, that didnt sound too reassuring. Given that there were only a few dozen insects buzzing around in the immediate vicinity, Dallion decided to hope for the best.

Several minutes more and it was all over. Most of the party members were under thirty percent health. Dallion and June, though, were in their eighties.

You can stop with the music, the lieutenant said. Its over.

And indeed it was. The entire bog had disappeared, leaving nothing but a few clusters of deformed plants and large clods of dirt behind. If Dallion hadnt seen it with his own eyes, he would never have believed it possible.

That was it? he asked in amazement. That was cleaning up the bog?

One of them, the lieutenant replied. And weve not done yet. We must still get rid of the cracks, and the plants as well. Then well have to fix a few of the break spots.

I thought killing the cracks did that.

Killing a crack removes a crack. It wont help against any deformations. The lieutenant pointed at the spot where the crack had been.

While there was no trace of the creatures, there clearly was a giant indentation, as if someone had dropped a very large bowling ball.

Thats the last phase the cleaning.

The most boring thing of all, Spike grunted.

Its not like you stay for it, Alera smirked. Some of us like to relax a bit after a fight.

Some of us dont have any taste either, Spike crossed his arms.

Either way, the lieutenant raised his voice. We still have work to do. Dal, you can call your minion now.

On command, the firebird appeared and started the healing process. As it turned out, its ability was very welcomed by the party. Normally, a cleaning of this sort would involve multiple area awakenings the party would deal with one area at a time, then exit the realm for a few minutes to recover. It all depended on the task, of course, normally high-level sanitation work wasnt this bad, requiring only a few or in some instances just one entries to get the job done. In this case, though. The condition of the house was beyond abysmal. The party members didnt hide their criticism of the owners for letting it get this bad, especially since the foundations and materials were rather high end.

The talks quickly devolved into a discussion of homes and prices, which seemed normal according to Nil. Sanitation jobs were long and boring, even if Dallion wouldnt call them that, so people

tended to spend the off hours talking about the mundane things of real life, including dreams that might never come to pass. Alvera was trying to calculate how many jobs she'd have to do before affording a house of the type they were repairing. After some help from Dallion, who was skilled in game number crunching, it turned out that she might well manage to achieve her dream in about sixty-seven years, provided the prices remained the same.

Spike, on his end, had a dream of buying a tavern, mostly so he could take part in brawls every night. The rest of the people that chose to share had somewhat more realistic dreams. Skiv was looking to get married and support a family. The other youngster in the group wanted to hit it big and rise up the guild ranks. As for the lieutenant, his only interest was getting the job done fast, well, and without much fuss. It was as if Dallion was speaking with an accountant, an accountant that slayed monsters and defeated guardians for a living.

What about you? Alvera asked Dallion. What are your plans?

My biggest plan is to start getting some of my dreams done, he replied with a laugh. Seriously, though. I want to get into the twenties. That was sort of a lie. There were other things on his mind, but there was no way he would share them here. After that, who knows? Maybe become a hunter.

A hunter. The old man shook his head. That will be the day.

I know, I know. Hunters are born and made, Dallion recited. I'd still like to try at some point.

Kid, that has nothing to do with it. Two things. The man raised two fingers. Hunters can't be part of a guild without special permission. And even the Countess can't give you one of those. You'll have to get one from the Archduke, or maybe even the Imperial capital. Good luck with that. Also, hunters can actually die.

Dallion waited for some sort of explanation. There wasn't any.

What about the other thing?

The permission? That's true, but there always are workarounds. Your gorgon lover isn't part of the guild, but she does business with us. All hunters do a lot of business with a lot of guilds, merchants, and

I was about to say nobles, but the city guard is an option as well. Keep in mind they are also one of the few who could legally do business with the mirror pool without getting into legal trouble. Do you want to work for the city guard? I would recommend against it.

Why?

That's a conversation for another time.

Everyone healed up? the lieutenant asked.

The party members looked at each other. All of them were back to full health.

What do you want us to take on first? The cracks?

The trees. Once we get those out of the way, well get a better idea of the big picture. Stay away from the cracks. If they go active, all gather on me. Well make our stand there. No engaging them on your own.

Everyone nodded.

Dal, youre with me. Everyone else, head out solo.

With a sad chirp, the familiar obeyed, returning to Dallions realm.

I promise Ill take you out again sometime. Just have a bit of patience.

The members of the group dispersed, all heading to their respective patches of plants. The lieutenant, however, remained still.

Youll be doing all the work, he said, looking at Dal. Ill only be there in case something happens. That okay?

Sure? Dallion wasnt certain why the lieutenant was asking him for permission. There was no trace of sarcasm in him, just the standard emotions he had been with since entering the realm of the house.

Im asking if youre feeling confident enough. Youve seen what fighting here is, but so far, youve done none yourself. If youre to get ready for serious exploring, youll have to learn how to do it on your own. When March asked me to take you on, she also had one condition to get you ready for the real thing.

The world item

Exactly. If you think things are intense here, you better give up on the idea of setting foot in the sword.

Youve been there?

A few times during the first expeditions. After a while, I decided it wasnt worth it. There are some things that money cant buy. Crippling is one of them.

Crippling the term was rarely used, but even so Dallion knew exactly what it meant: becoming corrupted by the Crippled Star.

These things are easy, the lieutenant went on. You get bit by a corruption tick and youre done in a few weeks, months if its serious. You get in trouble there you might get ruined for life, or even worse. So, do you still want to go through with this? You can always refuse Marchs offer.

Ill see this through, Dallion replied. All the way.

Chapter 209: Chipping In

There were a lot of ways to define the word adventure. Back on Earth, going to a store in an unfamiliar neighborhood could be described as an adventure, or trying out an exotic dish of food for the first time. In Dallions world of gaming, an adventure usually meant a specific game mode, or going on an activity involving exploration in a way similar to what movies, books, and graphic

novels illustrated. In this realm, cleaning up a house was an adventure, as was getting rid of some plants.

The patch of trees that Dallion had been tasked to cut up looked like a mix of giant algae and a willow tree. The only problem was that like any other living metaphor, the plants tended to fight back.

Given that initially they only swung their branches about, Dallion was left with the impression that the moldlings were stationary creatures. After a few hits, he was quickly proved wrong, as the tree burst into a series of snakes heading for him. It was only thanks to the reaction of the armadil shield that he managed to get some protection. Even that wasn't a huge advantage, though, since all it did was ensure that it wasn't Dallion who was wrapped in snakes, but the sphere that the shield had turned into.

After twenty seconds cocooned in his gear, the inevitable knock on the shield's surface came to be. Dallion contracted his shield to see the somewhat disappointed expression of the lieutenant. The man didn't say a word, but then again, he didn't have to. Dallion's failure was obvious to everyone. Still, that was no reason to give up. Gritting his teeth, Dallion went to proceed with the next tree.

The fight there was much better planned. This time, Dallion used splitting to avoid falling into the same trap. It was a good approach, although it took a bit of getting used to. Every attack Dallion did was instanced with a retreat alternative. In most cases Dallion never had to rely on it, but there were a few in which he was glad he had this backup. From the vibrations of emotions coming from within the lieutenant, it was clear that Dallion was on the right track.

Subtle splitting to coin a phrase used by Nil was undoubtedly a tremendous advantage. The problem was that it required a lot of concentration. With Dallion's current mind level, he could barely last a minute before needing rest. Apparently the same held true for other awakened as well. That was why people didn't rely on it non-stop in a fight. Even Vend, who was one of the few gifted exceptions, didn't go full out. For that matter, neither had the Star. Although in that particular case, maybe it had more to do with the properties of the dagger itself.

The thought sent chills down Dallion's spine. If the Star had the ability to be in a non-stop split state, there was no way Dallion could win another encounter. His only hope was that the Moons would prevent the Star from doing that.

It took nearly five minutes for Dallion to deal with the second and third trees. By that time, other members of the party had finished with their respective tasks and were on their way to the lieutenant to watch the show.

As the people near Dallion grew, so did the amount of advice. Suggestions ranged from footwork to what weapons to use. Initially, Dallion tried to follow them to the letter. Then he tried to phase it out as useless noise. Then, after killing another two moldling trees, he finally understood what the goal was. Granted, it was his music skills that helped him, but he saw that all of this was a sort of crash training.

The biggest clue, in hindsight, was the unusual silence of the lieutenant. During the fight a while back, he was the only one shouting out orders, while everyone else was remaining silent. Now it was the opposite.

Good to know.

Dallion didnt have the heart to tell Nil, or anyone for the matter, that he had pretty much been dealing with such situations since he was eight. In the world of MMOs and voice chat, it wasnt rare for everyone to shout stupid advice and get the entire party wiped during a boss battle. Item and area exploration were pretty much the same with the sole difference that the people were a lot less, and for the most part much better organized. That explained why being offered to join an exploration team was such a big deal. As Nil had explained once, roughly a third of the guild members were only involved in improving single items, or acting as packrats during sphere item exploration; and that was only for the Icepickersin other guilds, the number of solo awakened were much more.

In total, it took Dallion fifteen minutes to finish off the small patch he was given. In the process, he had lost about seventy percent life, although thanks to Lux, he had always restored it to full after every combat. It was obvious that the rest of the group werent too impressed with his performance, although Dallion could also tell that they werent disappointed either. That pretty much put him in the spot he was expected to be not dead weight, although it would be a while before theyd let him join in fights.

So, how do you feel? the lieutenant asked. Still think you can see it through.

I might need a bit more practice, Dallion replied, massaging the temples of his head. The splitting had taken a lot out of him.

The man nodded in reply.

Youre not ready, and you wont be after the job is done. Still, at least youll know how to keep yourself safe. After that, its all up to March.

Not the best encouragement Dallion expected. After this, he was going to have to step up his game and gain another level, not to mention max out his current skills including forging. That, though, was likely to take a while.

Now that youre done, how about you see what it was all about. The lieutenant pointed at the horizon.

One look was enough to make Dallion gasp. The invisible veil had been lifted, revealing one giant mountain in the middle. It was so large that it pierced the clouds above it, continuing to infinity.

Thats the path to the upper floors. Once were done here, well set on up to fix whatever problems there might be there.

Itll be childs play compared to what were doing here, Alera said. Climbing will be rough, though. Especially for someone who doesnt know how. You sure you dont have any athletics?

Sure. Dallion shook his head.

Thats bad. Well have to carry you.

That definitely wasnt going to be dignified. The thought of trying to somehow acquire that skill passed through his mind, but was quickly abandoned considering how many other goals Dallion had set for himself.

We get rid of the burrowers, the lieutenant said. Then move on to the next swamp. Same plan as just now. Alera goes ahead to scout and Dal is support. The rest, on the ready.

Will there be any more ticks? Dallion asked.

Dont worry, youll have lots of chances to get up close and personal with them, Spike laughed. A place in this state is filled with creepy crawlies.

The party moved on towards the black clod in the distance. Without the swamp, it looked like a large black boulder half buried in the ground. When they reached a hundred feet, the surface began to move. Soon after giant tentacle eel heads shot up into the sky, as they had done before. Without the swamp, the creature didnt seem remotely as threatening. That didnt change the fact that it was much larger than the one June had faced, and also had several heads, very much like a hydra.

Go, the lieutenant ordered.

The entire group dashed forward, weapons at the ready. Dallion was the only person who stayed behind. Knowing his skills and limitations, he summoned his harpsisword and started to play the obligatory dizzy melody. Once he got the sync right, he also began to sing.

The groups attack pattern was close to perfection. Never had Dallion seen such perfect coordination. On several instances, it seemed like one of the group had got into trouble by creating a blind spot, but that turned out to be a ruse. When the crackling pack reacted to take advantage, another person of the party would swoop in and slice the tendrils off.

It was also worth noting that the elites attacks were far more refined than what Dallion had seen so far. Even experienced awakened tended to target the weak spots with the goal of grinding the enemy down to a normal size. This group didnt leave that to chance, forcefully slicing out individual cracklings that formed the pack. In less than a minute, the five headed monster was down to two heads, and each of those in turn was sliced into three parts. Some directly burst into individual cracklings as they tried to escape, while others tried to fight on in their present size. Either way, they were quickly caught and slain.

Its an approach Im not fond of. The result is the same when it comes to real time, but theres a lot of true time wasted. Some would argue that theres no difference, but I would say if you have time to waste, you are not living up to your full potential.

Was he one of your trainees?

Dear boy, a lot of the elites have had a lecture or two from me. That doesn't make them my apprentices or trainees. In general, I try to stay away from that sort of thing. It shows preferential treatment, and that's something to be avoided.

That was slightly confusing, especially given the preferential treatment Dallion had received so far. It wasn't even a secret that Adzorg was still at odds with March about her getting her clutches into Dallion. There was no need to point that out, though. At the end of the day, even captains were humans with their own flaws.

The fight continued longer than everyone expected. Just when it seemed like the crackling pack was close to being defeated, more of it would emerge from the hole in the ground. When it was over, the burrow it left behind in the ground was the size of a rather large cave with branching tunnels. No wonder a whole bog had formed on top. The scary part was that after all that effort, the realm had only been mended to twenty-three percent. By Dallion's calculations, that suggested that there had to be at least five other swamps with the appropriate number of cracklings left. No wonder people weren't thrilled with sanitation jobs. It was a living, no doubt, but it was long, laborious, and unrewarding.

There are places in which it is. Nerosal, though, allows a bit more freedoms to its citizens, as do all backwater cities.

This is hardly a backwater city.

In fact, it very much is, dear boy. It has its charm, the exotic feeling of the frontier, but as far as cities go, there's no comparing it to a provincial capital.

Chapter 210: Purple Moon

As night in the realm approached, the party retreated to the cleaned areas to make camp. With a group this size, three shifts were formed to ensure that everyone got enough sleep while those awake kept an eye out for any threats. Dallion, as having the lowest perception, was paired with Alera and the old man, while the rest were in pairs. The lieutenant was the only one who was to sleep the entire night.

Initially, Dallion didn't see this as fair, but soon he found out that this was due to popular demand. No one wanted a party leader that was off, so during the party downtime, they were careful to ensure that as little as possible disturbed him.

Want me to get Lux to sit about? Dallion asked. He's pretty good as a torch.

Great. That will make all the nasties see us better, Alera said.

Right.

Dallion felt ashamed. During his dagger test, he had specifically left the lantern given to him behind, and proceeded into the darkness for that specific reason. Yet, here he was now making the same rookie mistake. Rather, he wasn't making that mistake, he was making an even more basic one trying to impress the elites and in doing so, not thinking adequately.

Everyone was a newbie once, the old man said. Dont feel bad, but dont expect too much slack, either. It is what it is.

Maybe I should have had a bit more training before tackling this, Dallion admitted.

Maybe. Or maybe the point was for March to see how well you can swim.

Huh?

We dont know anything about the world item. Even the sphere items are a stretch. The low-level ones are easy, but the really serious ones well, you saw what could happen there.

You mean all this is just a test?

Life itself is a test, the old man said, at which Alera rolled her eyes. Dallion got the impression this wasnt the first time the story had been told. Venturing into the unknown prepares you for the unknown. Playing it safe prepares you for playing it safe. Do you know what so few item menders move to anything bigger?

Thats bullshit. Alera hissed.

There are exceptions, but even you have to admit there arent many.

That is her business, dear boy. As I said, the Icepickers are the place for people who are running from something or running towards something. Do you want people to learn about your own history?

Dallion had to agree. The whole reason he used the name Darude was to no longer be associated with his grandfather. That part of his past was best left unshared.

What about you? Dallion turned to the old man. Did you choose to do this?

In a way. I used to be a guard a long while back.

Dallion blinked. He didnt expect that in the least. There was nothing in the old mans appearance or behavior that suggested he could have been part of the city guard.

I think its time everyone shut up, Alera said, although it was she who had started the conversation. Ill scout about a bit, just to make sure.

Do your thing, the old man replied with a nod.

Want me to come with? Dallion offered. If his music skills were to be trusted, there wasnt anything threatening as far as the eye could see. Nox also didnt sense any cracklings in the vicinity.

Im better on my own, the woman replied. The emotions resonating in her made it clear she was telling the truth.

Moments later she set off, leading Dallion and the old man behind.

Dont worry about it. Thats the spark of youth. You lot feel as if everything is the end of the world and youre the center of attention. Give it a while and youll find that there are other centers.

Why am I not surprised youd agree with someone your age

Dear boy, soon youll find out that everyone tends to stick to people their own age. Even the awakened.

That was a scary thought.

Most call him Serge, though as a running joke. The name hes chosen for himself is Gray, in part due to his hair. Either of that would do.

They have no choice. Once their name has been forgotten, even they cant remember it,

Dallion didnt expect such a dark turn. He had already met a person who had had his name forgotten; it was completely removed from everyones memory and all other instances it was mentioned. However, he thought that was a practice reserved only for the most serious offences. After all, neither Aspion, nor his grandfather had had their names forgotten; instead, they were banished to Dherma to remain there for the rest of their lives.

What did he do?

That is another of those things that is best left untold. Its enough that it got him kicked out of the guard, wouldnt you say?

Dallion had no answer. Part of him wanted to leave the matter alone, to pretend it never happened. However, deep down something told him that wasnt wise. Despite everything he had learned, there were still a lot of things he didnt know about this world, and the power of forgetting things was one of them.

A faint snap came from the distance. Dallion jumped to his feet, summoning his harpsisword.

Easy, the old man said. If its anything serious, Alera will raise the alarm.

But what if something happens to her?

Then well raise the alarm.

As it turned out, the woman was fine. She had indeed come across a creature of some sort and dealt with it. The more alarming part as far as Dallion was concerned was that he hadnt been able to sense it in the least. When he later asked Alera about it, she only responded that it wasnt his concern.

With the start of the second shift, Dallion took his place near the camp and tried to get some sleep. His body level made it ignore the discomfort of the terrain, however, he still couldnt sleep.

Curiosity mixed with concern had him remain awake for close to an hour, before Gen got into a conversation with him that eventually made him doze off.

Alas, the sleep wasn't accompanied by calm

Cool room, right? Nick asked. Best one on campus. You're really lucky, you know.

Nick was Dallion's roommate. Similar to Dallion, he had arrived a week early to get the paperwork done and get settled in. He seemed like an okay guy, although he gave the distinct impression of being a rule bender if Dallion had ever seen one.

We'll see when the rest arrive. Dallion said from his bunk. The room was slightly smaller than he would have liked, but in quite good condition. Also, Nick had already plugged in two game consoles for common use, as well as a rather powerful desktop. Personally, Dallion didn't think he'd be playing that much, but an occasional game now and again wouldn't hurt.

Just gives us more time to party, Nick laughed. In fact, there's one this evening. Want to join?

Sure. Partying the first day? There was definitely a certain charm in that. Where?

Not too far off. We can walk there. More importantly, we can crawl back quietly without causing too much trouble.

Sounds like you've done it before.

Me? Nah. Well, maybe once or twice. Got to take advantage of the last few days before studying starts. After that I'll have to come up with excuses.

Right, Dallion laughed and went to the window.

There was a serene quiet, especially with most of the faculty and student body not arrived yet for the start of the semester. Dallion could understand why someone would spend all their time partying there was virtually nothing else to be done. Even the university library was closed. Not that he planned going there this early on.

Looking at the sky, though, Dallion noticed that the moon seemed larger than back home. Not only that, but she seemed to be surrounded by a faint blue glow.

Under a blue moon, Dallion said.

Huh? his roommate looked up from his bed.

The moon's blue tonight.

Seriously? Nick jumped up and joined Dallion at the window. Wow, you're right. Let me get a few snapshots. This'll be great on my insta.

The chances of a phone capturing the moon in all its glory were quite small. Even with the new advancements in cameras, Dallion had yet to see a non-professional shot look good. Of course, there always was the chance of this being the first, so he took a step back as Nick started snapping photos.

Doesn't look blue, though, Nick said while taking pictures. I'd say it's green.

Yeah, right. Dallion took a glance out of the window. He had already prepared a jokey insult, but very much to his surprise it turned out that Nick was right. The blue glow Dallion would have

sworn he'd seen moments ago was now replaced by a toxic green light, as if he was looking at a science fiction moon. Weird, Dallion said. He had never heard of there being a green moon.

Man, this is going to be wicked! Nicks speech reverted to eighties slang. People will dig this! Getting the green one is ultra-rare.

Dig? Dallion smirked.

Only the purple one is rarer, and that only happens once in a decade.

Purple moon? Things were starting to make less and less sense. What are you talking about?

You know. Nick turned around and stared at Dallion. The sixth and seventh moons. You don't see those every day. Heck, you don't see them every decade! Arriving here was definitely the luckiest thing that could have happened to you.

Sixth and seventh moon? That made no sense at all. There was only one moon, and it certainly didn't change color at random. And just to confirm it, Dallion took out his phone and did a quick google search on the topic. Very much to his surprise, the very first hit was a site talking about the seven moons and their colors. What was more, in one section there was reference to another moon, an eighth hidden from all the rest, which had no color of its own and could never be seen except by the remaining seven moons.

Dal. Spike said. Time to go.

Go? Dallion blinked. It took him a few seconds to figure out where he was. This wasn't the campus back on Earth; it was the realm of a house that needed cleaning.

In that case, I would say that yes, it was a dream.

You alright, kid? Spike asked.

Yeah, I'm just I'm fine, Dallion slowly stood up. Where are we going?

We can wait for a while longer, the lieutenant said. Sleeping in an infested realm can have that effect at times. Give it a few minutes.

No, it's fine. I just Dallion stopped. Above his head, almost made invisible by the rays of the morning sun, there were seven moons visible in the sky. The purple moon, he whispered.

Yeah. Spike glanced up. I guess we're lucky. It's rare to see it. Maybe you're our lucky charm.

Dallion didn't say a word. For some reason, he didn't feel too lucky right now.