

Leveling up 31

Chapter 31: Inside Oneself

Wow. It really worked!

Dallion had managed to enter the awakened state without focusing on an object. The room was just as he remembered it from before. The only difference was that this time there was a doorway, as well as two framed items on the wall a buckler and a short sword. Looking closer, he could see a word beneath each.

Attack six, Guard nine, the boy read out loud. The moment he did, a blue rectangle appeared in the middle of the room.

YOU ARE LEVEL 3

Thank you for the obvious, Dallion laughed and tapped the rectangle away. Any way I can see my stats?

Sadly, the room didn't respond. Given that he was presented with a single way to continue, the boy walked through the door. Initially he expected to find himself in a corridor, like last time. Instead, he entered a small library. It wasn't much of a library, rather the same stone room, only full of wooden shelves covered in books. A blond scribe in bright red clothes was sitting at a large wooden table in the corner, writing something on a scroll of paper with a large black feather.

Hello? Dallion asked.

The scribe didn't pay any notice to him.

I said, hello!

The scribe looked over his shoulder with bored disgust.

Who are you?

Go back to your room, the scribe replied. There's nothing for you to see here.

Are you blind? I'm working.

Working on what? Dallion moved closer. Among the scrolls and pieces of paper, he spotted a map of his village. It looked slightly different from several structures he didn't remember seeing.

Curious, Dallion reached out for the map only to get slapped on the hands by the scribe.

Hey! Dallion pulled his hand back. What was that for? I just wanted to get a better look at the map.

You don't need to know about the map, the scribe snapped. He appeared to be the same age as Dallion, possibly slightly shorter, and definitely far more annoying. Don't you have things to do? Just let me work and go about your business!

Well, I just might! Dallion yelled, then turned around and left the library.

See if I dont! No one talks to me like that in my own awakening room! Ill go now, but next time I come back, well have words!

The room disappeared. Dallion was again in the dining room of his grandfathers house, still furious at what had happened. He was just about to vent his frustration to the elder, when he suddenly noticed the old man was smiling.

How did it go? The elder asked.

Well, I found a library. Most likely that had to be a development linked to his awakened level. It stood to reason that as his level increased, so would his personal realm. Why a library, though? There was some annoying scribe inside. Said that he was busy working and shooed me out.

Why did you leave?

The question puzzled Dallion, mostly because he had no good answer to it.

Because he asked me? That sounded stupid. Itll be different next time. Next time Ill go and tell him exactly what I think of Whats so funny?

You. I didnt expect your first experience with a limitation echo would be a scribe in a library. You must like books a lot.

Nah. Dallion wanted to say that he preferred to look things up online. However, that would make little sense to anyone in this world. For all intents and purposes, a library was as good a representation as any. Not that much.

Its different for everyone. Theres one constantthe limitation echo.

Limitation echo whats that?

Have some more to eat. The old man stood up. I need to take care of something. Ill be back in a bit.

Usually, this was the point in horror movies that the person who uttered those words disappeared never to be seen again. Sometimes theyd leave a vague clue behind, or a bloodied piece of clothing. To Dallions relief, his grandfather soon came back with a bottle of alcohol. Remembering the effect the drink had on him last time the elder poured him a glass, the boy quickly pulled away from the table.

Want some? The old man offered, to which Dallion vehemently shook his head. Your loss. He took a swig from the bottle. Youve already noticed that people around here dont explain much. Everyone just seems to know the basics and goes along with their life.

The boy nodded.

The only reason youve started to notice is because youve reached level three. The greater your awakened level, the more youll start to notice, the more youll start to question. Didnt it seem strange that up to a week ago you had so little questions?

Thats because everyone has an echo limiter. Think of it as something that keeps you from asking questions and offering answers, and also keeping things you know hidden from you until you actually need to use that knowledge.

In what way?

Whats the name of this village?

Dherma, Dallion replied instantly.

Whos the name of the lord whose domain were part of?

The boy couldnt reply. The name was on the tip of his tongue. He had used it dozens of times, everyone had, but for some reason he couldnt just remember right now.

Thats what a limiter does, it limits your knowledge. Those who are awakened get a chance to see bits and pieces, they can even trick the echo in their awakening room and glimpse some of their knowledge. However, until the echo is defeated, theyll never get the whole picture. And just as the average person wont talk about things, I cant tell you much more than you already know.

That was it, the mini-Eureka moment Dallion was hoping for. On the surface his grandfather hadnt told him much, just a few scraps of information that he could have potentially figured out on his own. However, he had given him the key to unlocking everything.

Thats why you kept repeating that you can tell me things now.

Who created the echo? Dallion asked.

Who do you think? The old man smirked.

To get rid of an echo, you must defeat it like any unwanted creature in an awakened realm. Youll have to get a bit stronger than you are now, though. The elder took another gulp of his bottle. To destroy all the echoes, though, you need to defeat their creator. And for that youll need to break your first major threshold.

Chapter 32: Level Capped

Life slowly returned to normal after Dallions first village task. It was outright astonishing how quickly everything around the events left the villagers consciousness. After just one day the only people who referred to the improvement of the well, were the boys parents. After one more even they hardly mentioned it anymore, carrying on as if that had always been the case.

The village chief and his family also ended all interactions, remaining in their mansion. On a few occasions Dallion would see Gloria venture outside the walls of the chiefs house, only to go back inside.

If there was such a thing as the perfect status quo, this was it except for Dallion. The conversation with his grandfather had opened the boys eyes and now he couldnt stop seeing the weirdness in behavior of everyone around. Often hed deliberately ask questions that interested himthe Order of the Seven moons, what was beyond the village, the state of the world, only to watch the

conversation slowly drag on to the usual nothingness that people spoke about. It seemed that from the entire village, only he had retained his spark of curiosity.

As the days went by Dallion kept using his awakening powers. Once most of the important items in his house had been improved, the boy then helped out some of his neighbors, some family friends, even his aunt Vanessa. It was through this fashion that the boy discovered that there was a limit imposed on his leveling activities. Apparently, once he reached level ten of his skills, no matter of defeating guardians did anything.

Improving an area also seemed out of the question. When Dallion tried with a shed, the only thing he was able to do was improve the board he touched. When he tried improving the wall of his house, nothing at all happened, as if he were touching air. Clearly Dallion had to improve his awakening level, alas that had turned out easier said than done.

In half a week alone, Dallion had made four attempts to complete the fourth trial of the awakening shrine, and each time he had fallen short. The sand dragon thankfully a quarter of the size of the one he had faced with Gloriaproved to be both faster and smarter on a tactical level than Dallion. It was like playing a sidescroller on highest difficulty with just one life. No matter how well the boy did, there always came a moment in which hed make a mistake and be thrown out of the challenge. In one instance, Dallion regretted being able to see the guardians health; losing when the enemy boss was at two percent life was probably the most gut-wrenching experience hed experienced since the first time hed had his heart broken in high school.

After Dallions seventh failure, the boy felt he had reached his limits. The last few times had been abysmal. Not only didnt he reach his record of two percent, he had been eliminated while the dragon was at half health. If he had learned anything from his experience against the well pack, it definitely wasnt fighting dragons.

The boys awakening level allowed him to make a few more attempts. The recent failures, though, made him reluctant to try. Instead, he went back to the riverbank next to the village and lay on the ground. The stars shined above him, forming constellations he knew nothing about. No doubt there was a story behind each, possibly a local zodiac linked with the worlds myths and legends. Until the echoes were removed, it was unlikely Dallion would learn about them.

Its not easy reaching level four, is it? a familiar voice asked. Glorias bent down above the boy, her face blocking most of the stars. Hey.

Hey, Dallion said, not budging. Yeah. Its tougher than I thought.

Of course it is. The girl carefully cleaned the ground next to Dallion and sat down. If it wasnt, Id have done it years ago. Did you reach your skill limit?

Yes, I reached my skill limit. Part of Dallion was annoyed that she was talking to him, though another was glad that she had come here. How did you know Ive been going to the shrine?

I started going there the moment I learned about it. Why wouldnt you?

That stood to reason.

Also, you left a lot of tracks. Dont worry, grandfather doesnt believe in perception. He thinks its a useless skill. I guess thats why he finds me such a disappointment unless it comes to negotiations.

So, what happens now? Know any shortcut to help me pass the fourth trial?

Nope. Gloria shook her head. You have to do it by yourself.

No help? Thats a bit mercantile of you.

Even in the moonlight, Dallion saw her cheeks change color.

Its not like that! Id already reached level four, the challenge is blocked for me, and theres no way you can handle the fifth one.

Oh. Dallion hadnt thought of that, despite experiencing it himself. Sorry, I completely forgot about that. Any chance Id convince any of your relatives to help out?

Gloria stared at him for several long seconds, then burst out laughing. For some reason that made Dallion feel better as well.

Only you could ask such a thing. No, I dont think theyll do that. My brother hates your guts, and the rest dont want to get on grandfathers bad side. Not that theyll be any help, she added in near disgust. Theyre happy to stay at level two and spend their lives improving trinkets and bossing people around.

Your brothers level three?

Hes a natural, so grandfather doesnt want to get him to get too strong. If he knew about me, Id probably remain locked at home. There was another long pause. Sorry I didnt warn you about the trial. I wanted to, but grandfather would have found out

Its okay. No one else warned me either. That was a bit harsh, but Dallion wasnt in a charitable mood right now.

I didnt get what I wanted either Gloria said.

Experience back on Earth had taught Dallion two valuable lessons: to know when someone changed the topic to something regarding their problems, and to be smart enough not to interrupt when they did.

Grandfather is marrying me off in a month. He said he found a suitable travelling merchant with a son. When I improved my clothes for the third time, I hoped hed think of keeping me here and let me have my own choice, but the girl looked at the stars. Seems like that never was an option. Im not even sure the event will take place here.

You dont have a say in the matter?

No one has. Grandfather has already found two candidates for my brother's wife as well. At least hell get to stay here. The girl clenched her fists. Im the fourth highest awakened in the village and I still cant

Abruptly she stopped. As far as Dallion was aware, less than a second had passed, yet his keen perception noticed that a stone on the ground next to the girls fists had become far more polished than the rest.

Sorry about that. I just needed to talk to someone.

By that time, Dallion was going to do everything possible to find a way to defeat the village elder and destroy all of his echoes.

Chapter 33: The Echo

Brother, brother! Linner shouted loud enough for half the village to hear. Look what I got!

The child never seemed to get tired, making Dallion wonder whether he was the only awakened in the family. If stamina was any indication, his younger brother definitely had him beat.

Look! Linner rushed up to him, holding a small scaly fish. Isn't it great?!

Wow, that's a winner. Dallion smiled.

If he were to be honest, the fish wasn't anything special. It was barely large enough to fit in his hand. His brother, however, looked at it as if he'd caught the greatest treasure there ever was. That was the thing about children—they didn't only enjoy the simple things in life, they enjoyed virtually anything.

I know, right?! Dad helped me catch it!

Translated that probably means that his father had actually caught it, but let Linner hold the fish after he'd taken it out of the net. Come to think of it, Dallion didn't have any memories of fishing either in this world, or Earth.

Mom promised she'd let me help her cook it! Want to watch?!

Oh, yeah. Dallion said with an indecisive smile. You go. I need to do something, I'll be right there.

Promise? The child gave Dallion a serious look.

Absolutely. Do you doubt me? Internally he sighed. There was no escape now—he had condemned himself to a few hours sitting in the kitchen, observing the cooking. Then again, maybe it wasn't all bad. He could use a break.

Okay. Don't take long! The child rushed away.

YOU ARE LEVEL 3

The blue rectangle greeted him.

This is getting old, you know. He tapped it as he passed by.

It felt as if the room was snickering at him, constantly reminding him that he had failed to increase his level despite all attempts. Well, today Dallion was going to take a different approach. His grandfather had told him that he'd remain defeated until he got rid of the village chief's echo. If so, this was a perfect time to get rid of it.

Dallion walked into the library. The scribe was there, rearranging the books in the library.

You again? the echo snapped the moment Dallion crossed the threshold. Go do something useful. Im busy.

The boy felt an overburdening desire to do as he was told. A voice in the back of his mind reminded him that this was a library and any fighting that took place here would do more damage than the scribe himself. Clenching his fists, Dallion took a step forward despite the internal pressure.

No! he said firmly. Im not leaving! You are!

The line felt so cheesy that Dallion was ashamed that hed even spoken it. Thankfully it had the desired effect. The scribe stepped away from the library and turned so as to face the boy.

So, you want to fight, eh? The scribe asked with a half-smile, that only increased the smugness of his tone.

Not if you leave. Dallion drew his sword.

A sword? The scribe laughed. Dont you know that the quill is mightier than the sword?

The cliche felt like chalk on a blackboard. Dallion winced, then opened his mouth to voice a suitable reply. Before he could dozens of green lines appeared from all over the room, all ending in the boys chest.

What the heck?

Dallions reaction was immediate, but so were the dozens of quills that appeared out of nowhere, darting at him like a barrage of arrows. Dallion jumped to the side, buckler in front of his face. Guard markers appeared on the floor, but even they werent enough to fully save him.

COMBAT INITIATED!

Now you tell me!

Gritting his teeth, Dallion knocked down the table, attempting to use it as a second shield. Alas, the only thing that did was to cause the quills to change trajectory.

QUILL WOUND!

Health has decreased by 5%

QUILL WOUND!

Health has decreased by 5%

QUILL WOUND!

Health has decreased by 5%

QUILL WOUND!

Health has decreased by 5%

Seriously?!

Dallion rolled to the side. Less than a few seconds had passed and already hed lost a fifth of his health, not to mention that he remained constantly on the defensive. The scribe had barely moved from his original position, observing the whole thing with mild sadistic amusement. There was no white rectangle above his head, suggesting that the echo would likely die in one hit. However,

neither Dallion, nor his skills saw any way of reaching the blond menace. Not a single red marker had appeared, and charging head on was likely going to transform the boy into a porcupine.

QUILL WOUND!

Health has decreased by 5%

QUILL WOUND!

Health has decreased by 5%

More quills poured down from above. At this point, there was only one thing left for Dallion to do.

Im leaving! he shouted, jump rolling towards the door. Im leaving!

A few quills followed, scoring another few hits, but the brunt of the attack had stopped. The next thing Dallion knew, he was back in his house, looking at his brother running towards the kitchen.

As most people whod gone through such an ordeal, Dallions first reaction was to check his body for wounds. The good news was that there were none. The bad newsit didnt look like hed defeat the echo anytime soon. If nothing else, hed have more luck with the sand dragon.

Dallion, his mother called out. The tone of her voice sounded urgent.

The boy did one final check of his legs and backs, then finding no sign of blood went to the kitchen. When he got there, he found both his mother and brother standing near the window, still as statues, looking at something outside.

Is dad back? Dallion asked casually. Did he bring more fish?

Its not your father his mother said, her voice barely a whisper.

Outside, at the edge of the village a small group of people were approaching. They were nothing like the local villagers. All of them were dressed green and yellow medieval tabards with chain armor visible underneath. The leader of the procession was a tall muscular woman riding a brown horse. From what Dallion remembered of his DnD sessions, she probably was a noble of some sort, complete with helmet, shield, and a suit of half armor. As she approached closer Dallion was able to see the crest on her shield: seven different colored spheres on a black background.

The order of the Seven Moons, Dallion whispered.

Chapter 34: The Archduke's Envoy

The arrival of the Order was accompanied by the calm type of confusion that Dallion had grown to expect. For the most part the people seemed vaguely intrigued, just as someone would be if a distant relative suddenly showed up on the door. On her part, the members of the order had annoyed contempt written all over their faces.

I am Dame Vesuvia, here by order of his grace Archduke Lanitol, the woman said loudly. It was impressive that her horse didnt budge an inch as she did, as if it were made of marble. Who is in charge of this village?

Immediately a couple of people set off in the direction of the chiefs mansion. The rest of the crowd started whispering amongst themselves, all the while keeping a safe distance from the soldiers.

Eager

to learn more the boy took a step forward. As he did, his mother grabbed him by the arm.

Mom? The boy arched both brows.

Dont go, the woman whispered, gripping his sleeve tightly.

Why? Whats the matter?

Dont go, she repeated.

I am Aspion Luor, the village chief said. His voice was twice louder than Dallion had heard him, though compared to the woman he sounded like a kitten trying to roar at a lion. How may we serve the Archdukes envoy?

At the mention of the archduke, several of the soldiers smirked. A mixture of amusement and disgust covered their faces, not the Dames though. If anything, she remained on her mount with the determination of one who would see the world melt in flames before showing any emotion. Just looking at her made Dallion feel cold chills run down his spine.

A chainling has been seen somewhere in this area. We are to hunt it down and kill it. The Womans eyes narrowed. How many awakened do you have?

Awakened?

Dallions heart skipped a beat.

Not many. Aspions hand trembled. Conscious of the fact, the chief quickly hid it behind his back. This is a simple village, Dame. Most of the awakened are old without the necessary skills to

How many? The Dames voice sounded like granite being squeezed into a cocktail.

The village chief wavered. Dallion watched him transform from the majestic all powerful undisputed ruler of the village into a weak trembling old man.

A dozen, the chief whispered looking down at the ground. Close to a dozen.

How many are fit?

Two, maybe three... but

Three. The Dame audibly sighed. It was clear she was hoping for more. Get them armed and ready. We'll be heading out within the hour.

But, Envoy, none of us can leave the village? How will they accompany you?

Theres a cleric from the Order of Seven with us. Hell see to that. All you need to do is bring them here. And bring some provisions and hay. Enough to last a week.

Yes, Dame. Aspion bowed even lower.

Wow.

To say that Dallion was impressed was an understatement. In his heart he always knew that the nobles had to be more powerful than the chief, but even he didnt expect such a difference in levels. What he wouldnt give to have the ability to determine a persons level by sight. Maybe he could ask directly? After all, he had to be one of the three awakenedthe chief wouldnt shy away from putting him in danger, also most of the other awakened knew were either too old, too young, or unsuited for fighting.

Dallion, his mother whispered. Please dont go.

Ill be fine. The boy smiled.

As much as it pained him seeing his mother in such a terrified state, he didnt see himself as having a choice. His mother didnt either, she slowly released her grip, letting her hand slide off Dallions sleeve.

I promise Ill be alright.

I know youll try. The woman forced a smile on her face, through tears were still sparkling in the corners of her eyes. Dont put yourself in danger.

Dallion nodded, then quickly followed the rest of the crowd as the soldiers made their way to the village square. In total there were twenty-one of them, most equipped with swordsproper swords, not the oversized dagger Dallion had to use in his awakened stateand chainmail armor. Near the end, though, there was a small group clad in leather armor. Judging by their somewhat confused state and cheap clothes, it could be assumed that they had been taken from other villages to help out with the hunt. There was one person, however, who was dressed in a dark blue robe.

The hood kept the clerics face hidden, making it impossible to tell anything about him. The only other thing that stood out was that unlike everyone else, he didnt seem to have any weapons, armor, or other gear.

Hey, you! one of the soldiers shouted at Dallion. What are you looking at?

Im an awakened? The boy replied. Despite the impressive fashion in which the soldiers had arrived, Dallion still had some pride left.

The soldier didnt even pause to reply, only snorted with a shake of his head, then kept walking on. Unperturbed, Dallion did so as well. A spark of arrogance had lit up in him for some reason, pushing him to show that he was no worse than anyone here, with the exception of the Dame, of course.

What about you? The boy asked loudly, short of yelling.

Its not worth it, a large red-haired man in worn leather armor said. Youll be travelling with them for a while. Best not get them mad this early.

If there was someone who could be described as a walking red bear, this man definitely was it. Not only was he one length taller and two wider than Dallion, but his head, face, and arms were covered in bright red hair as if he had implanted a furry crimson hoodie to his skin.

Names Havoc, the man said.

Havoc?

Long story. My parents had a sense of humor. Others didnt approve of it much. How about you?

Dallion. Dallion Seene.

Dallion. Havoc made a serious expression. Guess your parents had a sense of humor as well. Whats your level?

Three. Saying out loud made Dallion feel instant regret again that he hadnt managed to defeat the sand dragon. You?

Used to be more, but Im down to four now.

The boy gaped at Havoc.

Long story. Anyway, a piece of advice. Never pick a fight with a soldier. Youll end up regretting it. Also, stay away from him. The man glanced at the cleric. You never know how humorous the Seven are feeling.

Chapter 35: Among Monsters

As time passed, interest in the soldiers began to wane. While the children and some young adults remained on the edges of the village square, most of the rest had gone back to their everyday chores. Bread, fruit, water, and what little other provisions the villagers had were brought to the soldiers only to be grumbled and accepted with such disdain one would think the soldiers were doing the locals a favor.

Even the horse had initially ignored the hay given to it with a series of snorts. A quick glance from its owner, though, quickly changed its mind.

Fill all flasks and water sacks, the Dame ordered, as she splashed some water on her face. Unlike her troops, she didnt seem in the mood for food, water, or even rest. A few steps away the cleric stood silently, like a shadow defying the sun.

Dalliononce he had revealed he was one of the awakenedhad been placed a half a dozen steps away and told to remain quiet. Soon, he was joined by the remaining two village volunteers. It was no surprise that Veil, the village chiefs grandson, had been sent, but Dallion didnt expect Gloria to have been as well.

Youre all I got? Dame Vesuvia asked. For once there didnt seem to be annoyance in her voice, rather a hint of regret. Names?

Gloria Luor, the girl was first to reply. The chiefs granddaughter.

Veil Luor. Her brother puffed up his chest, in an effort to impress.

Dallion Seene. Dallions added in the end. My grandfathers one of the elders.

Hereditary ones. The Dame nodded, then moved closer. Skills and levels?

There was a moment of silence. Veil and Gloria had been brought up knowing not to share details of their abilities with anyone outside the family, and certainly not in public. On his end, Dallion didn't have any desire to have the village chief learn what he was capable of.

Two threes and a four, the cleric said a short distance away. His voice was dry and scratchy to the ear.

Whos the four?

The cleric pointed to Gloria, earning her an impressed nod from the Dame and a face of utter disbelief from her brother.

I've got attack skills and body at ten, Veil quickly said.

As much as Dallion hated to admit it, that was outright impressive. Even with a single skill, that much power ensured he'd be able to fight nonstop for days. Back on Earth, he would have been an MMA champion at least.

And you? Dame Vesuvia asked Gloria.

Attack and athletics at ten the girl hesitated. Perception at five

Seven, the cleric corrected. His hood then turned to Dallion. Attack and Guard. Reaction at eight.

Single focus bumpkins. The Dame sighed, then went to take a seat on the edge of the well. I guess that's all I could expect from a place like this.

Could have been worse. At least they've reached their cap.

Do any of you have experience fighting?

Veil crossed his arms with a confident smirk. Even Dallion felt somewhat insulted by the question. Of course, they were experienced in fighting; the fact that each of them had increased their stats to such a level should have been enough. Dallion alone had defeated over a dozen guardians, not counting his experience in the well.

Actual fighting? The Dame clarified. As in against other people?

I've been hunting many times. Veil gave Dallion a quick glance, the glance screamed I'm far better than you, scum as if he'd said it out loud. I've killed deer, boar, sometimes wolves.

And you two?

Gloria shook her head.

I caught a fish with my bare hands once? Dallion cracked a joke. The lack of response told him that it had been the wrong move.

So, none of you have actually fought, the Dame said firmly. Not even between yourselves?

Grandfather doesn't allow fights between awakened, Veil said with a semi-grumble. I could have, though. I can take on anyone here if you'd like?

I don't have the time for games. We'll be fighting for real stakes. If you mess up there, you'll end up dead. If you don't mess up, maybe you'll be lucky enough to get away with a few scars and most of

your body parts intact. You'll be given an emblem and a dartbow. Guard both with your life, because if you lose it you might as well be dead. Now join the others.

The speech wasn't particularly invigorating, but it got its point across. If there had been any doubts that the three of them were in the weakling category, they were now gone. One glance at the soldiers' weapons was enough to show that their equipment had been improved multiple times and mended to perfection. The silvery gleam suggested that the level of each being well above seven, possibly more.

What level do you think they are? Veil whispered as they made their way to the non-chain-mailed group of soldiers on the other end of the square.

That was an unexpected shift in behavior on his part. For the first time Dallon could remember, the blond's anger and arrogance had vanished. One would almost be tempted to say that he and Dallon had grown up together, if not outright friends. Being told there was a high chance of dying tended to do that to people. From this moment on, all three of them were members of the same village—nothing more, nothing less—and as such they had to stick together.

Seven, maybe eight, Dallon replied.

Eight Veil whistled. I can't even imagine what it's like to be eight.

Double digits, Gloria said. They're all double digits.

Don't be stupid, her brother snorted. There's no such level.

That's what they are.

Grandpa told us there's no level beyond nine. Are you calling him a liar?

No! The girl snapped back. That's what I see when looking at them. All of them are double digits.

We must stick together, Dallon whispered. During the hunt we watch each other's backs.

Hey, Dallon! Havoc waved to the trio. Welcome to the volunteers. Don't worry, it's not as bad as it sounds. Keep your heads low and everything will be fine. The large man smiled.

So, this hunt isn't as dangerous as the Dame made it out to be?

Oh, it's dangerous alright, but we won't be the ones on the front lines. As long as they don't pick you as a scout or lure, you'll be just fine."

Yeah, Dallon laughed, despite the sudden pain in his stomach. One stat was needed to make a good scout and Gloria had it at level seven.

Chapter 36: Awakening Failed!

Here's your emblem, the cleric handed Dallon a pendant on a silver chain. The pendant was composed of six gems placed on a circle of pale blue metal. Wear it all times, don't lose it.

The materials alone were probably worth more than the entire village and everything in it. Dallon could see how a less scrupulous person would be tempted to grab a few pendants and run off to

enjoy their ill-gotten gains. As the metal touched his skin, a sudden warmth enveloped him, feeling like a summer breeze.

What does it do? the boy asked.

It makes sure you don't get blocked if you lose an awakening fight. Here's your dartbow. He handed the boy what appeared to be a hand-sized metal crossbow. Don't lose it, don't use it unless fighting or training.

I'm not even sure how to use it.

Dallion examined the weapon. It was comfortably light, and smooth to touch. No string, or springs were visible, just a metal frame, a simple trigger, and a small limb. It seemed impossible that the device would shoot anything, even if it had bolts. The craftsmanship, though, was exquisite compared to anything the boy had seen in the village.

You'll have your first training after nightfall. Until then, you'll just carry it.

No, I mean, I don't know how to use ranged weapons.

This response made the cleric pause. Moving a step closer, he removed his hood, revealing a very pale head completely deprived of body hair. Red eyes stared straight at Dallion, then at the group of people behind him.

You have guard and attack skills, the cleric said.

That's right. But I've only been using a short sword during my awakening trials. I didn't even know you could get a crossbow his voice slowly trailed off.

The items don't matter. Hasn't anyone explained this?

Items in the awakened state aren't real. They're only the reflection of the skills you've obtained. The sword becomes whatever weapon you take inside.

Nope, it doesn't. I tried taking a pitchfork, and all I did was

Before Dallion could finish, the cleric grabbed his hand. The surroundings instantly disappeared, replaced by a stone courtyard stretching into the infinity.

Personal Awakening!

What the heck?

Dallion jumped back. Instinctively he reached for his sword, but the weapon wasn't there. Instead, a dartgun was holstered on his side.

Draw the dartbow, the cleric ordered.

Dallion hesitated. It was clear that he was in an awakened state, but why wasn't he in a room? This didn't look like an area, and it definitely wasn't the usual room he started in. The closest thing he could compare it to was the inside of an awakening shrine.

Draw it.

Right. Dallion did as he was told. Inside the awakened state, the weapon looked slightly different. A metal string had appeared connecting both sides of the limb as well as a single metal bolt on top. Now, the weapon looked much more like a miniature crossbow.

Aim at me.

Are you sure?

The cleric sighed, then gestured to Dallion to go ahead.

Okay, then

The moment Dallion raised the dartbow, a series of red markers appeared. Two footprints had formed near the boys feet indicating what stance he should take, along with a line from the tip of the bolt continuing forward like a laser pointer.

That was new. Dallion moved the weapon about. It was just like the cones he saw when guarding against attacks, only reversed. There were no words to describe the sudden sensation of power that came with ranged combat. No longer would Dallion have to dance about in order to do an attack. The sensation was dwarfed by the greater realization that awakened skills were in fact groups. It was so obvious, and yet Dallion had never thought about it. It didnt help that his grandfather was incapable of telling him.

Aim, the cleric repeated.

The moment the red line touched the clerics shoulder, though, he froze. This Dallion from this place didnt particularly care, perceiving everything as normal. The Dallion from Earth, though, felt a deep reluctance to continue. The logical part of his mind told him that there was no danger, that the pendant would protect the albino from the bolt. All he had to do was get on with it. Before he could, the cleric drew a dartbow of his own and fired an arrow straight at Dallions chest.

Fatal Attack!

Health reduced by 100%

Awakening failed!

What the?! Dallion leapt back, only to trip and fall on his bottom. Hed just been cast out of his awakened state, defeated with such ease as if the cleric had swatted a fly.

Laughter could be heard nearby, including Veils.

Youre no longer playing games, the cleric pulled his hood back up. Get some training. Improve or you wont be coming back from this.

What did you do? the boy asked, but the cleric had already started walking away.

Why had no guard markers appeared? They had always done so when he was under threat, even when half asleep. This time there had been nothing. Dallion never had a chance to react.

You showed him. Veil approached with a laugh. Maybe teach me how you did that, okay?

Confused, Dallion looked around, trying to make sense of his surroundings. To his surprise, Veil helped him up, then walked him to the others.

Dont worry, weve all gone through this, Gloria whispered as the two approached. It takes a bit getting used to.

Hes the only one that fell on his ass, Veil snorted. Clearly, he wasnt going to let that go anytime soon.

He was fast. Dallion swallowed. I could barely see him attack.

Thats what its like fighting a double digit. Good thing well be in the back.

Any other day, that would be a relief. Considering the number of soldiers and the fact that they were gathering additional soldiers only raised questions. If a cleric of the Order could do that to Dallion, what was the creature they were chasing capable of?

Pack up and get ready! Dame Vesuvia shouted. Were leaving! Volunteers, follow the line!

Chapter 37: Basic Training

Walking turned out to be far less fun than expected. Initially the trio was fascinated by everything, as if they had stepped across an invisible barrier at the village limits and earned themselves a taste of freedom. As time passed by, the sense of wonder faded away. The grass was just as green as in the village, the surroundings just as empty, and the roads mostly nonexistent. The entire village began to look like a bubble of civilization in the wilderness.

Another interesting thing, as Dallion found out, was that the group wasnt exactly from the Order of the Seven Moons. The main group was composed of soldiers and volunteers from the Archdukes lands that were doing their job eliminating nuisances in his domain. The cleric was of the order, obviously, and in part the Dame. According to Havoc, she was first and foremost a noble, but had spent enough time in one of their cathedrals to be made an Initiate; that gave her certain privileges within the organization, including a personalized pendant.

Dallion had no idea what exactly personalized meant, though he suspected it was more than having a different casing.

In the evening, the group paused for a rest. On Earth the process would have involved putting up tents, building a large campfire, as well as setting up guard patrols to protect the area while the rest slept. Here, the Dame let everyone know they had half an hour to eat and rest before continuing. What was more, Dallion, Gloria, and Veil were told they would have to undergo basic training in that time as well.

You three, a bulky soldier grumbled. Gather round.

Initially, the request seemed weird. It didnt take long for Dallion to see that the rest of the volunteers had also gathered in small groups, each with a soldier. If each group was composed of people from the same village, there had to be four in total less than Dallion would have expected for the domain of an Archduke.

Take hold, the man offered his hand.

Sorry, but whats your name? Dallion asked.

The soldier blinked, paused, then narrowed his eyes. Why?

Since youll be our trainer, I thought we should know how to address you.

Several waves of emotions passed through the soldier's face. The only ones that Dallion was able to catch with his perception were surprise, wonder, and a split second of gratitude.

Kalis, the man replied. Clearly no one had called him a trainer before. I'll just be showing you the basics, don't get your hopes up, he quickly added in a harsher voice. Let's go.

Personal Awakening!

Once more Dallion found himself in an unknown space. This time, it was similar to a training room. Weapons and target dummies were scattered about almost in chaotic fashion. Kalis was also present, as were Gloria and Veil.

I'll take us a few days to catch the chainling, Kalis began. That gives you about ten training sessions at most, so don't waste them! Have any of you used a dartbow before?

Naturally. Veil said in a smug fashion, looking sideways to Dallion.

I haven't. Dallion raised his hand. Other than when I got it. That had been a bit of an embarrassment.

It's simple. Aim and squeeze the trigger. Your attack skills will handle the rest. Just keep one thing in mind. Out there you won't get to see any markers. You'll have to rely on what you've learned. The soldier waved a finger at Veil's face, almost drilling a hole in the boy's nose. No shortcuts! Got it?

In response, the blond drew his weapon in one move and shot a bolt right in the head of a nearby training dummy.

Like that?

One had to admit, though, that Veil was quite good at that. Maybe he didn't have the perception of his sister, or the reflexes of Dallion, but he had spent a large part of his bored life fighting, in and out of awakened state.

Passable, Kalis turned to Gloria. Can you match that?

Calmly, the girl aimed and fired two shots. Both bolts hit the same target, burying themselves an inch from either side. Having good perception had its advantages.

Not bad. Where have you learned to use a dartbow like that?

Family heirloom, Gloria replied.

Fair enough. How about you? Kalis asked Dallion. Just try to hit the target, okay?

Darude, Dallion whispered with a smile.

Okay. The soldier nodded a few times. You're not a lost cause after all. At least I won't have to explain the boring stuff.

Training is over? Veil frowned. I was expecting something a bit more challenging. Cant we get a moving target at least? Or fight against each other?

Who told you training is over? The hard edge in the Kalis voice made all three of them freeze in place. I just said well skip the boring stuff. The real training starts now.

All weapons and target dummies vanished in the blink of an eye. A large cage emerged in the far end of the room. Only darkness was visible inside, as if the cage contained the night sky.

COMBAT INITIATED!

In one minute, the cage will open. Kalis said with a wicked smile. Its up to you three to survive for five minutes. Those that dont wont get any food. Use any skills you have.

Thats it? Droplets of sweat had appeared on Glorias forehead. Dont we get any advice?

Work together, dont get cornered, and try not to die too fast.

What if we kill it? Dallion asked.

Without a doubt the challenge wasnt going to be easy, but having a specific goal in mind tended to help Dallion focus better. And who knows? There was always the chance the three of them could actually pull it off? Back in the awakening shrine neither he nor Gloria could defeat the sand dragon, but together they managed in one try.

Kill it? The soldier laughed. Kill it and Ill give each of you a silver coin.

It wasnt the level increase Dallion had been hoping for, but a silver coin was nothing to sneeze at.

Youre on. Dallion cracked his neck. He had one huge advantage the soldier hadnt taken into accounthe had a buckler and the skills to use it.

Chapter 38: Practice Guardian

PRACTICE GUARDIAN

Species: UNKNOWN

Class: UNKNOWN

Statistics: UNKNOWN

Skills: UNKNOWN

Weak Spots: UNKNOWN

The cage burst open, releasing the darkness within. Black strands whirled through the air, giving form to the unknown creature. This was the first time that Dallion saw something unknown. Even when his perception was low, the white rectangle still gave the species name and class. It was as if the creature had somehow surrounded itself in a shroud of invisibility.

All three trainees came to the same realization in less than a second and reacted in an entirely different fashion. Gloria used her acrobatics skills to leap back as far as possible, holding the dartbow tightly in front of her. Veil shot three darts at the forming silhouette. As for Dallion, he took a defensive side-stands, raising his left arm just enough to cover the upper part of his torso with his buckler.

Three black strands emerged from the silhouette, grabbing hold of the three darts before they could hit their target. Dallion swallowed. This wasn't a good sign. Two glowing red eyes emerged in the darkness, then a series of sharp blue teeth very large blue teeth.

Green markers appeared, though not the usual markers. In the past, defense markers had always provided options against attacks, yet this was the first time Dallion was given a choice between three different attacks. Three green lines started from the creature's mouth, linking it to Dallion's left leg, Veil's right arm, and Gloria's throat.

Look out! Dallion shouted, while his mind frantically made an attempt to analyze the situation.

It had to be a pack creature. That's the only thing that made sense. Within seconds it was probably going to split in three and attack each of them. A second later, Dallion was proven wrong. The creature leapt forward, ignoring Dallion completely, heading straight for Veil. The blond managed to fire one more bolt before the blue teeth sank into his throat.

FATAL WOUND!

VEIL LUORs health has decreased by 100%.

A red rectangle appeared just as Veil went out of existence. By now he was probably back in the real world and without supper. That wasn't Dallion's main concern, though. Two sets of defense markers remained.

Gloria, get here! he shouted, aiming at the creature.

The moment the red pointer touched the monster's back, Dallion squeezed the trigger. As with Veil, the bolt never reached its target. The creature simply jumped to the left, avoiding the attack with ease.

That wasn't supposed to happen. Dallion shot again, then again, and again. Bolts flew along the trajectory line like a stream, each missing by a few inches each time. It was almost as if the creature was toying with Dallion, directing most of its attention on Gloria.

The girl seemed to be perfectly aware of that, for she continued to retreat backwards towards the wall. It wouldn't be long until she ran out of room. Once that happened the creature would finish her off and go for Dallion.

Time appeared to slow down. Dallion's mind went through the options. His speed couldn't match that of the creature and all of his attacks were easily avoided.

I need more time!

If he charged the creature, there was a chance that he'd create a good enough distraction for Gloria to attack. With her stats she'd probably strike at the creature's weak spot.

Dallion glanced at his weapon. It was impossible to improve anything while in awakened state. He had tried improving his buckler, sword, even clothes enough times to know it was impossible. However, there was one thing he hadn't tried.

Please work

. Dallion grabbed his right hand with his left.

The creature snarled, leaping away from the nearby wall where a doorway had suddenly appeared. This definitely wasn't what Dallion had in mind, but he took what he could get.

Get ready! he shouted and removed the buckler from his arm.

A single set of green and red markers appeared: a dash of footsteps forward, followed by a twist and release of the shield, just like throwing a discus. Dallion had never thrown a discus in his life, he had barely seen it done at the Olympics. Now was the time to try it out.

Without hesitation, he ran forward. His feat matched each step perfectly. After the tenth step time came to a stop a real stop, not just a trick of his mind. After another four, Dallion held the buckler as the marker in the air indicated, twisted his body and released it at the precise moment. The shield split the air, following a trajectory towards the beast's head. The attack didn't stop there, though. One more set of markers remained red markers indicating how and from where, Dallion should shoot his dartbow. And Dallion did just that.

Time returned to normal, along with a loud thump as the buckler struck the monster in the head.

HEAD WOUND!

??? has been dazed.

All actions will be performed at 50% speed for the next 10 seconds.

The bolt once again missed its target, as Dallion suspected it would, but it didn't matter; the distraction had been long enough for Gloria to join the fight.

COMBINATION ATTACK

Dealt Damage was increased by 200%

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage was increased by 200%

Chapter 39: Moment of Glory

The creature snarled, leaping away from Gloria. Without the status information there was no telling how much health it had remaining, but the damage was obvious. The beasts movements, although nearly as fast as before, were less precise, as if it had to think and guess where to go before it did.

The left side! Gloria shouted as she leapt off the ground, doing a wall run that would make most action heroes envious. Shoot at its left side!

On cue, red markers appeared in the relevant side of the creature perfect targets for Dallion to take advantage of. Bolts filled the air, coming from both sides. This time every second one hit its mark. While most of Gloria's were deflected by the strands emerging from the creatures morphing body, Dallions werent.

A new set of green markers appeared. Only one option was given this time rushing to the spot where Gloria would land back on the floor and shield her from an expected attack. It was interesting that the skill still functioned despite Dallion not having his shield.

There were several pros and cons to the situation. If Dallion were to follow the markers, hed likely be losing his supper to give Gloria a chance to defeat the beast. After all, her skills were better suited for this specific case, not to mention shed had more practice with the dartbow. On the other hand, Dallion could reclaim his shield and then try to take on the creature on his own. This could potentially create some short-term tension between him and the girl, although a silver was nothing to laugh at, and who knows, maybe hed even impress the rest of the group?

Stay behind me! Dallion grabbed her in a hug like embrace, then turned his back in the direction of the creature. There was no way his back could match the sturdiness of a buckler, but for all intents and purposes it would hopefully be enough to cushion one blow.

To Dallions surprise, Gloria also had a plan of her own. Initially, she moved in lockstep, allowing Dallion to position himself between her and the creature. At the same time, she also managed to take the dartbow out of his hand. Since he wasnt going to use it either way, Dallion let her have it. Having two weapons was better than having one. The girls action didnt end here, however. Instead of waiting patiently for the creature to slash Dallion out of his awakening state, she extended both arms forward on either side past him. Each hand held a dartbow, each dartbow was aimed at the creatures head. Moments later four bolts flew forward.

MULTI ATTACK

Dealt Damage was increased by 400%

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage was increased by 200%

GUARDIAN DEFEATED

Next thing he knew, he was at the camp again. Him, Veil, and Gloria were all still holding the soldier's arm who now was looking at them with an entirely different expression. He was obviously pleased with their victory, even more he was impressed.

I could have gotten him. Veil pulled back his hand with a grumble. Let me have another go. I'll get it this time!

You only get one go in real life, Kalis snapped. You get bread for supper. Mess up next time and you get less.

Veil let out a faux laugh, trying to appear that such things were beneath him. Dallion could clearly see the blond was furious at his defeat; it was written all over his face.

You'll get a silver. The soldier said to Gloria, making her blush slightly. Good speed, good approach, keep it up.

The girl nodded.

And you Kalis pointed at Dallion you get to eat your supper.

Because you're reckless and dumb as a brick in winter!

Dallion raised a finger to say something, then suddenly stopped. A brick in winter? What did that even mean?

You triggered your awakening, the soldier said.

Yeah? We all did.

Dallion didn't say a word. It had seemed a good idea when fighting the beast in truth, it was the only idea he'd had. Looking back now, it wasn't the best. Kalis was absolutely right doing something without knowing the consequences was worse than doing nothing at all.

Look. The soldier put his hand on Dallions shoulder. You got the right idea. As the only one with guard skills, creating opportunities for others is what you should do, but not to an expense of yourself. A guard whos dead isnt much of a guard.

I understand.

Thats good. Enjoy your food, then get some rest.

Typical soldier behavior. It was obvious even to Veil that Kalis was somewhat proud of their achievement, yet he never voiced that sentiment. Instead, he turned around with a stern expression and started walking away.

One question, Dallion asked before Kalis got too far away. How many killed the chainling echo on their first go?

Chainling? The soldier looked over his shoulder. That wasnt a chainling. That was just a strand-lynx cub. A chainling is something its better to see just once, or even not at all.

Chapter 40: Belt Buckle Meeting

Walking, training, food, and restthose were the activities associated with the hunting partyas the soldiers called the group. Looking at it logically, that much was a given. What made them different from troops on Earth was the ability to condense everything except the walking in three neat thirty-minute segments. It turned out that sleep in an awakened realm was just as adequate as the real thing, provided one didnt do it for over a real time week, as the Cleric has explained.

Dallion found the notion fascinating in its simplicity. Up to now he had never thought of using his awakening powers in such a way. His mother and grandfather had insisted that the real world was for sleeping and the awakened state was for training. Of course, back in the village everyone had time to spare. Here, time was a luxury the hunting party didnt have.

They kept marching day and night. Every morning and evening the Cleric would point them to a new direction, and everyone else would follow without hesitation. There was no indication that any of them used a map, and even the few conversations Dallion had managed to overhear didnt reference any area names.

Meanwhile, the training continued. Three times per day, Karis would gather the group and have them face a new echo. There was no offer of rewards, just observations, instructions, and the occasional smack on the head. To Dallions annoyance, he got smacked about as often as Veil did. Gloria, on the other hand, had yet to be punished. It was almost unbelievable that the spoilt girl whose leading focus was perception could be such a good fighter.

Veil had also vastly improved. Two training sessions were enough for him to find the monsters pattern and start using his force efficiently. What was more, he had started relying on Dallion for defense. The hatred between the two had slowly been put on pause, replaced by rivalry with each trying to outdo the other. Initially, it was a foregone conclusionDallion had two skills, not to mention that his speed gave him a vast advantage.

On the third day, things began to change. Word spread that the trail of the chainling had been found, indicating that they could catch up with the creature in the next day or so. This prompted a reorganization of the hunting party. The volunteers were moved from the back to the middle. Dame Vesuvia remained in front, with the Cleric nearby. No one was allowed to venture far from the

group, and all eating was to be done while walking. Rest and training was reduced to ten real time seconds.

Hey. Veil approached Dallion as they walked. I want to ask you something.

Dallion nodded. The blonde remained silent.

Well? Dallion asked.

Not here.

That was all Dallion needed to know. Apart from the obvious training had taught him one other thing: how to invite or be invited in an awakened state. Not saying another word, he grabbed Veils hand.

You are in a small metal room.

Complete the trial to improve the BELT BUCKLEs destiny!

Seriously? Dallion gave Veil an amused look. A belt buckle?

Its the first thing I thought of, okay? Veil snapped. Anyway, you heard about the chainling. Well probably get to fight it soon. Maybe tonight.

I doubt it. Havoc said itll still be a few days.

What does he know? Veil frowned. For some reason, he and the orange-haired giant hadnt gotten along very well. Also, that doesnt change the facts.

The facts?

Were trash. Were worse than trash. Were weak trash.

Despite Veils obsession with repetition, Dallion had to admit that he was right. In the entire hunting party there was only one level two. All the other volunteers were threes, with a few notable exceptions. That was part of the reason Gloria got special treatmentbetter food, more detailed training instructions, and on one occasion a chat with Dame Vesuvia herself.

If were to do anything, we need to get stronger.

Veil, were in the middle of nowhere. Its not like there are many people whod be impressed with

Im not talking about impressing people! Im talking about surviving!

In a persons life there were many instances in which their opinion about something was completely changed from one single event. In the case of Veil, this was that event. A simple clarification had made Dallion look upon him in a way he never had before. In the past he had always thought of Veil as a bully, someone who looked at the weak with disdain and enjoyed humiliating them. Even the recent rivalry hadnt been enough to change Dallions mind. However, there was another side to Veil as wellhe wanted to protect people.

Everything counts in large amounts. We might be useless trash shooting needles from the back lines, but every bit stronger we get will help. There was a long pause. I cant let Gloria do this alone, and I think you cant either.

Wow. When you go, you go deep.

Ill try to break through to the next level, Veil continued. I think you should do the same.

The Cleric. He was able to tell our levels just by looking at us. Maybe he knows of a way I could become level four as well.

Of course itll be difficult! Thats what Im telling you for! Werent you supposed to be the smart one?!

Anyway, Ill either get there or I wont. Thats not the point. You need to find a way to get stronger as well. If not through the Cleric, some other way. Got it?

Got it.

You better. Veil smiled. Ill kick your ass home and back if you dont.