

Leveling up 81

Chapter 81: Companion

The instant Dallion squeezed the trigger, the guardian shifted to the side. The creature was fast, not the clunky motion that Dallion had expected. The bolt flew wide by half a foot, but that didn't matter. While it would have been nice if the golem had taken another hit, Dallion's main goal was to get closer.

Three green shield markers appeared. Instinct made Dallion choose to place his buckler in the one to the back. This time he was lucky. The Guardian's fist smashed against the small shield, pushing him to the side.

Forcing his body to remain standing, he followed the set of green steps to completion. A second series of steps appeared. Apparently, the guardian wasn't planning on a single attack either. Dallion could see lines emerge from the golem's body, spreading in all directions like a pincushion. Each of those was a jet of water, and each would take considerable effort to avoid. At this point it would be much safer to take advantage of the time slow and shoot off the golem's arm. Dallion, though, continued with the next set of green markers.

Just a little more, he spun and stretched as if following an obscure nineties break-dance. Jets of water flew past him like spears, none of them making contact.

Another time slow occurred, bringing with it a new set of green footprints. Two more and Dallion would be able to use his escape attack cheat. It had worked against a level five guardian, certainly it would against a level three. Dallion, however, had already decided not to use it. Not only wasn't it fair but also it wouldn't do more damage in the long term. The village chief had already shown that there were ways to negate it. As Dallion's father back on Earth had said: if you can rely on something, don't.

The third set complete, Dallion took advantage of the guard skills bonus to leap closer to the guardian, then he fired two bolts at its arm. This time there was contact.

CRITICAL WOUND!

Dealt Damage increased by 200%!

ARM SEVERED

Enemy will no longer be able to make use of its RIGHT ARM

Barely had time returned to normal, when the guardian rushed at Dallion. The sudden role reversal caught the boy unprepared. Without its massive ranged attacks, the golem had no choice to engage in close combat.

Dallion could see three instances of his enemy rushing towards him. In each, both watery arms of the golem transformed into blades striking at him. In one instance, they went for his head, in two more they slashed through his torso.

Three choices, Dallion thought as defense markers appeared once more. Three choices. There was no time to defend against all. His chances of success were one in three not terrible odds, considering this world. However, there was one option that guaranteed a hundred percent victory. Dallion lowered his buckler arm, raising the dartbow straight in front of him.

Stop! he shouted.

The golem did, freezing in place less than two steps from the boy. Even so, an exchange of blows continued in Dallion's mind. He could see the golem try to attack him in a multitude of ways: direct pierce, evade and strike, point blank range water jet attack, even a rock attack with its last remaining rock limb. In some cases wound rectangles emerged, in others not, but in all Dallion ended being the winner.

Draw? Dallion offered.

The guardian shook his head.

The WELL guardian has admitted defeat.

Do you accept his surrender?

I'm fine with a draw, Dallion said. You won the previous battle, after all. Now we're even. Not to mention Dallion had a new weapon and some new prediction ability. That certainly hadn't been there before. Maybe it had something to do with his full awakening?

The WELL guardian has admitted defeat.

Do you accept his surrender?

You're stubborn, aren't you? Dallion smiled. You're sure about this?

The guardian nodded. As during their last meeting, Dallion accepted the offer.

The rectangle burst into dust. Along with it, the golem did the same. There was a bright flash of light, blinding Dallion for a while. When he regained his senses, the guardian was in front of him again, only now it was a new guardian.

WELL level increased

The WELL has been improved to FOUNTAIN WELL

A whole fountain? Beat that, Gloria and Veil.

There was no indication of a skill increase, sadly. Seemed like the level ten cap held even now.

OATH KEEPER

Keeping a promise brings its own reward. Sometimes it might be from your future, sometimes from your past.

That was an unexpected achievement. Dallion had gotten the gist of them, but in the past all achievements had increased some of his stats. In this case the description was vaguer than usual, or rather the promised reward was.

Mreow? A black puma cub poofed into existence before him. Slightly larger than a cat, it was the same creature he had petted out of existence when he had mended the well. Of all the well cracks, that had been the only creature that hadn't attacked him.

COMPANION CRACKLING CUB

You have gained a Level 1 companion!

While still young, the crackling is loyal and will always follow you both in the real and in any awakened world. The crackling will guard your awakening room, or attack any enemy you command in an awakening realm.

In addition, it can create cracks on objects in the real world. The size of the crack depends on the cracklings level.

You gotta be kidding. Dallion laughed. I just got a kitten?

The creature's appearance was the same as he had remembered it: a black silhouette of a feline with eyes, teeth, and claws. There was no denying that it looked cute, though. Recognizing Dallion as its master, the creature leapt up, landing on his shoulder.

Hey, there. Dallion reacted. While he could feel the crackling's paws, it didn't have any weight, as if a shadow was sitting on him.

Oh, boy. This will take a bit of getting used to

Chapter 82: Past Wrongs

A cub of destruction of all the things Dallion could have gotten, he expected that the least. It wasn't as good as a skill, but definitely better than a stat improvement. According to what the rectangle had stated, it had the power to create cracks on objects something which Dallion was definitely going to test out. To his amusement, the first thought that came to mind was that old YouTube from a Charles Chaplin movie. With Dallion's awakening skills and the cub, he could earn infinite money by breaking items and repairing them. Then again, he could do that without the cub.

Returning to the square, Dallion looked at the well. It had improved once more. While the size had remained the same, the stone had turned to marble, and there was a statue in the middle acting as a fountain. All was good and well except the statue was a depiction of Dallion himself in a heroic pose.

You just couldn't stop yourself, Veil said in jest as he glanced at the statue. At this point it was difficult to say whether he was impressed, or about to burst out laughing. I think you got your bad side, he snickered.

Dallion clenched his fist. Last time he was going to improve this fountain!

Yeah, yeah. Something for you to remember me by, Dallion grumbled. Also, to remind you that I got to level five first.

The phrase had the desired effect. Within seconds, Veil's smile vanished. Competition was one thing he took very seriously. Dallion had no doubt that the blond would spend weeks improving every

structure in the village, then have a go at reclaiming the village area itself. As petty as that was, it was also a good thing. This was Dherma might get back to what Dallion had seen it be decades ago.

Can you say something to Gloria for me? Dallion asked. Ask her to see me at the river. Ill pass through there before leaving the village.

Why dont you tell her yourself? Veil crossed his arms. Im not your messenger boy!

Ha! Next time Ill be twice your level!

With a wave, Dallion walked away, leaving Veil at the village square behind him. He had kept his promise to the well guardian, and now there was one last thing he needed to do before leaving. Well, actually two, but the second thing depended on Gloria. It didnt take a genius to realize that she had been avoiding him since the defeat of her grandfather. Dallion knew from experience that in such cases it was better to give her some space.

The roof of Dallions house was still half complete by the time he got back. Strangely enough, neither this father nor Linner were there.

Hello, Dallion said as he went inside. They werent there either. Maybe they had been called to help out with something in the village? Dad? Mom?

He went to the kitchen. It was empty too, not a trace of food to be seen. At that point he heard approaching steps followed by a heavy cloth-like object hitting the floor.

Turning around, Dallion saw his mother standing a short distance away, in the main room of the house.

Ive packed this for you, the woman said in a weak voice. Anyone could see she had been crying. For when you leave for the city.

Mom, I

His mother raised her hand, pleading with him to stop talking. This was difficult for her, more difficult than he could imagine. Thanks to his improved perception, though, he had an idea.

Its okay. She forced a smile, holding her tears back. After everything youve done, its normal that you leave. Youve been asking for the cities ever since your awakening. And its not a bad choice, its just

Dallion didnt think. There were many things he could have said, but he chose to say nothing. Instead, he went up to her and hugged her. He had known the woman for less than a month, but he had also known her since he had been born. In this world she was his mother and had always loved

and cared for him, despite the pain and sadness she had been carrying all this time. Dallions mother back on Earth had also reacted in similar fashion when he had set off for college.

Ill take care, he whispered. I promise.

I know you will. Youre an awakened, a full awakened. Just dont rely on your powers too much. Dont overuse them, and be sure to eat and rest well. Awakened need a lot of food, even if they dont feel it immediately.

I promise.

Ive gathered all your good clothes, as well as some money. Its not much, but

Just a small gift for the start of your journey. You might have awakened, but youre still my little boy.

That was the reason Dallions father and brother werent at the house. His mother had asked them not to be. She had known what he'd do ever since the day he had awakened in this realm. If that was so, there was one gift that Dallion could give in return.

Personal Awakening

Chapter 83: The Gift

You are in a small sealed room.

Gertha Seenes destiny has been sealed.

There was something ominous and sad about the rectangle. Dallion felt a chill just looking at it. So thats what happened to someone who lost their powers. He had heard the explanation several times, but this was the first time he saw it in person.

How? Dallions mother asked.

It had been decades since she had last entered this place. The memories had been so painful that at one point she had stopped trying. Eventually, years later, she had almost forgotten how to enter at all.

A guardian told me, Dallion replied. That had been another valuable gift he had received from the guardian of the well, along with the cub.

Apparently upon defeating Aspion, the village area had lost its owner. However, since Dallion was the last and only person to have defeated a structure guardian of major significance, he had been granted certain powers. In the past, Aspion had abused those powers to put echoes in all the villagers. Dallion had no intention of doing anything of the sort, but he was one thing he was definitely going to try to unseal his mothers awakening powers.

This is your room? Dallion asked. While still a level one, the place was far more elegant than his own room. Clean and tidy, it had no door, just a single object placed on one of the small walls a golden lyre.

This was my room, the woman sighed. I havent been here in so long she made her way to the lyre and reached for it. The moment her fingers touched it, the golden surface of the instrument turned to stone.

You tried to defeat a guardian with that? Dallion was more than impressed.

I was young and reckless, Gertha whispered, her fingers sliding along the lyre, but not touching it. Fighting isnt the only way to win a battle. But you are right. The lyre wasnt a good match. I tried and failed, and now my skills will be nothing more than a sculpture.

Not if I have anything to say about it. Dallion smiled. Nox, come out.

Several seconds passed. Dallions mother looked at him with uncertainty and concern. Realizing that, Dallion couldnt help but feel embarrassed, all because the stupid cub didnt respond to its name!

Come out, crackling, he sighed.

On cue, the creature appeared on his shoulder like a black silhouette. So much for making a good impression. Now, the only thing he could do was complete the task he had come here for and hope that it would be impressive enough for his mother to forget about this minor hiccup.

Mom, where did the door used to be?

You want to unseal my awakening power? A glimmer of hope resonated in her words, along with fear of disappointment. I thank you, but its not possible. Your grandfather told me a long time ago.

Its not possible for him. Dallion smiled. There was no point telling her the real reason. Thankfully, that was what the crackling was for. But it is for me.

Before Dallions mother could speak, the cub leapt off of Dallions shoulder and ran to one of the plank walls. There it paused for a few moments, sniffed the stone surface, and without effort walked into it forming a thin outline of a door.

I want to attack, he whispered. Three red markers appeared on the wall, each on a spot of the outline.

Here goes. He took aim with his dartbow and squeezed the trigger. One by one, the areas around the markers shattered like shards of glass. When the last one was gone, the entire wall within the outline crumbled to dust.

Gertha Seenes destiny has been unsealed.

A blue rectangle appeared in the air. As it did, the lyre regained its previous texture, becoming an object once more.

Mom, youre an awakened agai he suddenly stopped. Mom?

The woman hadnt budged from her spot. She stood there, still as a statue, her hand gripping the lyre on the wall. Tears trickled down her cheeks.

Mom? Whats wrong?

Nothings wrong. Its just I never dreamed the day would come again. After all these years, Im

There was little Dallion could add. Seeing his mother cry, even in such circumstances, made him feel uneasy. When he was younger, hed often run away when it happened. Now things werent that different.

Crackling, he said. The puma cub emerged from the wall and ran back to him. It was time to go. Ill leave you alone for a bit, Mom. If you can just give me an exit. This

Wait. Gertha took the harm from the walk and walked to him. You have no idea what youve given me. She wiped the tears off her face. After all these years Im finally myself again.

I think I get the gist.

I know its not much, but let me give you something as well. She held the lyre in front of him.

Youre giving me your skill? Dallion struggled to stifle his gasp. The gamer in him was overjoyed at the prospect at receiving a third skill, a rare one at that. The son, though, refused to accept it. I cant take this from you. You just became re-awakened

Im not giving it away, Im sharing it with you.

Dallion still hesitated.

If the Seven are against it, your fingers will pass through, the woman encouraged Dallion. Theres no need to worry. Nothing bad will happen to you, or me. Consider it a mothers gift.

A mothers gift Dallion looked at the lyre. It was exactly as he imagined a lyre should lookgolden and beautiful, as depicted in every cartoon and comic hed seen. He reached out and grabbed it, half expecting his fingers to go through it as if it were from air. To his astonishment, it felt solid.

MUSIC skills obtained.

You have broken through your sixth barrier.

Chapter 84: The Last Goodbyes

You have assisted GERTHA SEENE in her trial

GERTHA SEENEs Level has increased to 2.

It seemed that unsealing someone was treated as a trial in its own right. That was a relief. It meant that even if Dallion ever lost a battle that wasnt the endthere was always a chance of him being unsealed.

In less than a split second, the boy was back in the real world. The temptation to experiment with his new skills was enormous. After all, it would only take a moment. There were enough items in this room alone for him to increase his skill by five more at least. However, he resisted. Any excuse Dallion made to stay longer would only make leaving harder. Even now he was wondering whether not to find other people that had had their powers sealed and helped them, then possibly level up the village before he left.

I have to go, Mom, he whispered, stepping away from her. I need to find out whats out there.

I know youre so much like your grandfather. She took a step back as well. There were still tears in the corners of her eyes, but the air about her had changed. She was no longer the sad, frail woman Dallion had known her to be. There was a new strength emanating from her the mark of an awakened. Go and dont worry. Ill take care of things here and keep an eye on your brother. Its only a matter of time before he gets the same idea and rushes out to follow in your footsteps.

See you, Mom. Dallion took his backpack from the floor and left. It all felt too similar, like the time he had set off for college back on Earth.

Thinking about it, college was an apt comparison. Once he stepped out of the village area, he would also leave its protection. From then on he'd have to rely on himself to set his path forward, not on area guardians, or misguided tyrannical rulers. For all his faults and there were many the village chief had kept all the people safe. Outside, there would be no such protection, and while it was unlikely Dallion would face creatures as dangerous as chainlings, there would be considerable threats.

Did you finish what you had to do? a female voice asked.

Gloria was leaning on a building nearby, looking at Dallion with an amused smile on her face. Now that she no longer feared her grandfather, the girl had improved her clothes to the point it was obvious they were level five at least. Dallion also noticed that the building she was leaning on had changed since the time he had entered his home.

Yes, all finished. Dallion walked to her. And youve been doing your best to impress me.

Idiot. There was a barely noticeable blush on her face. I just wanted to remind you that youre not the only one with skills.

Im sure. So, will you join along?

Excuse me? Gloria blinked. The question had caught her completely by surprise.

Will you join me out of the village? Any way you look at it, it doesnt have much to offer. Even if you improve it, it will remain a small village at the end of the known world. The cities will be much more suited for your skills. Besides, Veil could handle things fine in Dherma. And he wants to.

Always thinking about yourself, Gloria sighed. No, Dal, I wont be joining you. And no, its not only the things my grandfather feared. Everyone knows the world is a scary place, you just dont care. Well, I do, and I also care what happens here. Its not about fixing a few houses, its about making

this village mean something, the village I was born in. Sometimes I feel you take all that for granted.

That was the truth, and more than Gloria could know. Dallion never saw Dherma as his home. Strangely enough, he didnt see Earth as his home either. In his mind both places had become temporary lodgings that were nice while he remained there, but not the place he wanted to be. It was difficult to explain, so Dallion didnt bother thinking about it much. All he knew was that something was waiting for him out there.

And when you place it on the map, what then? There was no spike or bitterness in his words, just unbridled curiosity. Will you find a husband and become the next village chief?

Who knows? Maybe, maybe not. The point is that it will be my decision.

Everything youve done was always your decision. Dallion chuckled. Back from the day you got me to help you pass your trial in the awakening shrine.

Yes. Gloria held firm. I guess it is.

I guess this is goodbye then?

The girl nodded.

Take care, Gloria. Maybe well see each other again somewhere. He started walking.

If you ever get tired of the cities, you can always come back, Gloria shouted behind him. Well be here for you.

Dallion adjusted his backpack and continued on. A few moments later he heard the sounds of running steps behind him. At first, he hoped that Gloria had changed her mind. Soon though, his improved hearing told him it wasnt her the person running after him was slower, heavier built.

Dallion! The familiarly annoying voice of Vanessa Dull filled the air. Dallion, wait!

Some things never changed. Chaos, echoes, and changes had no effect on Dallions aunt who was rushing towards him a large bag over her shoulder. No doubt she had heard he was leaving the village, just as she heard about everything, and wanted to catch him for some parting gifts gifts for her, that is.

Hello, Aunt Vanessa. Dallion stopped and did his best to smile. After all, this was the last time he was going to see her. Might as well depart on a high note. How can I help?

Instead of an answer, the woman dropped the bag at his feet, breathing heavily. She wasnt the type of woman used to running, so this small dash had taken a lot out of her.

I I she tried to peak gasping for breath. I heard youre leaving the village.

Thats right. If there was anyone who hadnt heard by now they certainly had. Dont worry, though. Ill improve everything youve brought before I go.

This is not for you, its for me! Some things my last husband left me! Now that things are returning to normal, I can finally put them to some use.

Dallion took a glance in the bag. It was full of statues and decorations. Apparently, the woman wasn't as poor as she had created the impression of being all these years. That was so typical of her. Still, to turn down a free item improvement that was unexpected.

Here. The woman looked around, then shoved something in Dallion's hand. Hide it and keep it safe.

Dallion took a glance. The item was small and metallic, very much like a locket or piece of jewelry. The metal, however, was unmistakable blue metal, the same used for making emblems.

How did you get this?

My late husband gave it to me. What did you expect? He was a travelling merchant. The woman snorted. You'll need it if you're to walk through the realm.

You knew about this? Dallion whispered.

Of course, I knew. Vanessa crossed her arms. Just because I ask for a small favor now and again, I'm not stupid! Why do you think I wanted your parents to send you to the monastery of the Seven? At least there you'd have been free from Aspians nonsense. Now get going. The faster you get out of here, the less painful it'll be.

That was the last words of advice Dallion received from a friend he never knew he had. All this time he thought that his aunt had only looked out for herself. That was only part of it. She was looking out for many people in ways that no one could realize. All the selfish requests, the random pieces of advice, they had all been subtle nudges to get this or that person moving in the direction that would be best suited for them. She had been a distraction to Dallion's mother, keeping her from thinking about the past, she had done her best to keep her family's spirits up in her own way, and she was the only one to have found a traveler's emblem which she had now given to Dallion.

See that, Nox? Dallion said more to himself than to his cub. The world is filled with hidden gems, as long as you know where to look.

Taking a deep breath, he took one last step, leaving the village area behind him. From here on the future was his to forge.

Chapter 86: Inn with an Elf

It was said that there were things in existence that were indescribable. Nerosal wasn't one of those places, but it was pretty close. Dallion had been in some pretty big cities when he had been back on Earth. Some of them were crowded, some of them were wide, but none were exactly like what he was looking at now. Clusters of towers shot up from clusters of houses separated by parks, forests, hills, lakes, even a lone mountain in the distance. Near one of the lakes, on top of the tallest city Dallion could see, a castle or rather a collection of very tall, very large interconnected towers rose above everything else, almost shining in the most perfect white ever seen. It was as if the whole building had been made of solid milk. Dallion didn't even want to think how many level improvements had been necessary to get the material to what it was now, now what was involved in the mending process.

Your eyes will fall out if you keep looking that much, Fatus said. The man had been grumbly ever since Dallion had improved his wagon. Even so, he had stayed true to his word, driving the boy almost to the outer gates.

Do I need to do anything to get in? Dallion asked.

Just walk through the gates. The driver waved with an annoyed expression.

Thanks, Fatun. I owe you one.

You better remember it. The man grinned. Ill be back to collect sometime. He pulled the reins of his horses making them turn the wagon around. A piece of advice. Get some new clothes before you get into trouble. Take care, kid!

Dallion remained where he was for a while longer, admiring the city before him. This was the place for which he had spent ten days wandering through the wilderness. Looking at it, there was no question that it was well worth it. Now all he had to do was walk in.

Humming a tune, Dallion made his way to the city gates. A squad of four soldiers stood there, none particularly interested in what was going on. At this time of day there didnt appear to be any movement in and out of the city.

Years of preconceived game notions had made Dallion expect one of the guards to call out for him and start a series of questions for which hed have to use his wit and possibly a bit of bribery money to slip through. Instead, two of the guards gave him a passing glance as he passed by, returning to their previous conversation.

The instant Dallion stepped past the invisible threshold, a cold chill shook his entire body, almost causing him to fall. A second later, the sensation was gone.

I really need to find a place to eat

, Dallion thought. Ten days on rations and rabbits had been enough to keep him alive, but definitely was nowhere near enough to help him recover from the leveling of the wagon. Normally Dallion would rely on his senses to point him in the direction of food. The city was so abundant in aromas, however, that he wasnt able to make out one thing from another. The only solution was to find a place the old-fashioned way.

Continuing along the stone-paved street, Dallion carefully examined the nearby buildings. As he expected, almost all of them were inns, taverns, and trading shops. Signs boasting the best conditions for the least price were placed next to every entrance. Dallions experience in the marketing practices on Earth told Dallion that these were likely the worst deals to be had in the city. Travelers that came from the outside would usually choose something close to the city gates and not bother with the far better deals further in. Thats why instead of looking at the facades and the offers, Dallion looked at the buildings surrounding the inns.

The further he went in, the more residential buildings started appearing. About twenty minutes later, after walking aimlessly along the streets, Dallion finally reached a neighborhood he found suitable. After another five minutes of asking passers by, he finally found exactly what he was looking for.

The inn was mostly empty when he got inside nothing but a few local regulars enjoying their drinks. Seeing him several of them stopped their conversations. Maybe it would have been a good idea if Dallion had taken Fatuns advice and bought some new clothes, after all.

Hello, there, a tall woman with flaming red curly hair said from behind the counter. There was no mistake she was the innkeeper, just as she wasnt particularly pleased to have riff-raff visit her establishment. What can I get you?

Hey. Dallion flashed his best smile. Id like a room and something to eat. He took out all the coins hed gotten from the village and placed them on the counter.

I can get you food, but rooms are a bit pricier than that, the innkeeper looked at the copper coins with amusement. Sorry. Youll have better luck at one of the inns near the city gate.

I know, I wont. Dallion had no intention of giving up. Theres more I can offer. Im a level six awakened and I can work to earn my keep.

Level six? The woman arched a brow. She was well in her late thirties, though still pleasing to the eye. Her post and air of confidence suggested she was one used to hard work and hassling. Show me. She took a large cracked glass from behind the counter and slammed it in front of Dallion.

Mend or improve? Dallion took hold of the glass. Or both? He didnt have any intention of improving anything for free either.

Just mend. The woman crossed her arms.

Dallion focused on his awakening power. One instant had passed in the real world. In that time, he had entered the awakening realm of the glass, spent well over five hours assembling a broken transparent labyrinth, and peaked at the glass guardian before triggering a guard skill escape.

There you go. Dallion moved his hand away. As he did, his stomach gurgled. Anything else? He quickly asked in an attempt to mask the sound.

What do you know The woman took the glass and held it against the light of a nearby lamp. Hey, guys, we have a level six. The room became filled with clapping and murmurs of approval. Jiroh, bring some food here! The innkeeper shouted in the direction of the door behind her. Tell Aspan no skimping this time! Kids earned it.

Sorry about that. The innkeeper poured Dallion a glass of water. Wanted to be sure you arent a semi. We get a lot of people claiming to be awakened, all looking for a free meal. Had to make sure youre the real thing.

That would only have been a problem if I weren't. Dallion was starting to like her. At least he knew that the place had standards. If the woman had accepted his proposal off the bat, he most likely would have spent the night, then gone searching for a better place. Im Dallion.

Hannah. The woman nodded. While you're here, I expect no funny business. First thing, no sex in the room.

Dallion almost choked. That escalated quickly.

No drinking, no eating, and no mess, Hannah went on. You break something, you mend it. If you can't, you pay it. You'll be fixing the place after heavy nights, as well as a thing or two from the regulars. One thing, you only mend what I tell you to mend. If you don't hear it from me, don't do it. And I mean don't. Got that?

Got it. Talk about strict.

Are you in trouble with the city guard or anyone outside?

No. Although technically, Dhermas village chief wasn't his biggest fan.

Running from someone?

Err, no?

Good! Stay that way! The moment you get in any serious trouble is the moment I kick you out! Are you registered?

I don't think so

Get registered tomorrow morning. I'll tell you what you need to do. Until then, don't go out too much. Oh, and another thing. She swept her hand over the counter, grabbing his pouch of coins in the process. Whatever clothes you have, throw them away. I'll give you a set for free. Everything else you'll have to buy on your own. You'll get half a silver for every item you improve here after you register. Questions?

Dallion started opening his mouth when the innkeeper interrupted him again.

Good! she cut him short. Go find a table. Jiroh will bring you your food, then prep your room. Don't give her any trouble! One mess up and you're out, I don't care how good at mending you are!

Yes, ma'am. Dallion whispered. He had seen drill sergeants less aggressive. Then again, all the drill sergeants he'd seen were in movies and YouTube videos.

Leaving his backpack on the floor, Dallion took his half full glass of water and went to one of the free tables by the window. It would have been nice if the innkeeper had poured him beer or ale, or even some kind of fruit juice.

While Dallion waited, looking out of the window, the kitchen door opened. Dallion could tell it was the kitchen door by the bouquet of aromas that burst into the room. His mouth watered. Dallion swallowed.

Here you go, a high-pitched voice said as a large plate with steaming food was placed on the table in front of Dallion.

Why, thank

Dallion froze. Even since coming to this realm, he had seen a lot of interesting and unusual things. The awakening powers alone were nothing short of magic. However, this was the very first time he had set eyes on a sentient creature that wasn't human.

Are you okay? the elf asked. Is it the food?

He's a village kid, Hanna shouted from across the room. I bet it's his first time seeing a fury.

A fury? So that's what the race was called here? It was definitely an elf, though! Dallion was certain of it.

Sorry. He managed to stop himself staring. I just

It's okay, the fury smiled. It happens when you get to a big city. There's a lot more than humans here.

I know I mean, I thought I was just never told that there were other races here.

Strictly speaking there weren't. Things changed after the war.

Thanks to his improved perception, Dallion was able to see that this wasn't a topic the fury enjoyed talking about. For the time being the best thing he could do was shut up and eat.

So, enjoy your meal. Jiroh smiled. I've told the cook to keep the spices down, but just in case you better get more water. I'll go get your room ready. She went in the direction of the staircase at the far side of the room. Top floor. It's the only room there, the fury said before disappearing up the stairs.

Dallion nodded, then several seconds later looked at his food. This was it! He had finally made it the first step towards his own adventure. Tomorrow, he was going to go about the city and learn what is what in order to make a name for himself. As for today, he had just rented a room in an inn with an elf. Could things get any better?

Chapter 87: The Icepicker Guild

Few things could compare to the joy of waking up in a comfortable bed. After a week in the wilderness, Dallion was finally able to appreciate the pleasures of clean sheets, soft pillows, and a complete lack of insects. What was more, the room was specifically designed with awakened in mind: everything was spotless, there were no creaking boards, the sheets and covers were meticulously soft, and there weren't any disturbing odors to be felt. Apparently, the practice of awakened helping out with chores wasn't new, so Hannah kept a room on the top floor just for that.

Allowing himself a few more minutes in bed, Dallion then got up and went to the water bowl. One of the greatest drawbacks of this world was the lack of plumbing. Washing and basic biological functions were vastly limited. Back in Dherma village, Dallion had had to do both outside his house. Here, at least washing was in the room, as for the rest there was a dedicated room on the first floor.

All washed up, Dallion put on the clothes Hannah had given him, and went down to the first floor. The shirt was a perfect fit, although the trousers were slightly on the long side.

There were no customers in the main room when he got there. Hannah was behind her counter, polishing a mug, as any innkeeper would, and Jiroh was busy setting up the place. A faint smell of alcohol came from the crack of the kitchen door. Someone had been partying, no doubt.

Morning, Jiroh greeted Dallion without even looking back. Furies, it seemed, had senses to rival that of an awakened. Slept well?

Very. Thanks. Dallion smiled. He still couldn't keep himself from staring at her ears. A faint whisper in his head dared him to go to her and pull one, just to make sure it wasn't an elaborate fake.

Here's your breakfast, Hannah grumbled as she placed a dish on the counter. Stop staring and come to eat up. I want you to go get registered first thing afterwards.

Sure thing. Dallion took a seat at the counter. The breakfast looked like scrambled eggs, but smelled nice and tasted better. Dallion couldn't even identify half the spices that went into the dish. This is really good. He said after a few bites.

Good, now keep that to yourself. Aspan has a big head as it is.

Dallion nodded. At some point he was going to thank the cook personally, though not when Hannah was around.

So, this registration thing, he asked casually. What's it about exactly?

Awakened have to be registered in order to mend and improve, Hannah explained. Of course, it's difficult to enforce the rule all the time. An item level up here and again won't get you in trouble, but in order to do anything more serious you need an emblem. And trust me, you'll be doing a lot of work here. The room you got doesn't come cheap.

There was nothing regarding registration in Aspians memory. Then again, Dallion had only seen a snippet. Or maybe registration was a recent development?

Any place specific I need to go? Dallion continued with his questions.

Look, I'm not here to

I'll help him out, Jiroh interrupted. I have a few errands to run anyway, so it won't be a problem.

Hanna narrowed her eyes. Dallion didn't have to be awakened to see that she didn't approve of the idea.

Just be quick. The innkeeper relented at last. I'll need you back before lunch. Killian said he'll be celebrating a catch, and I don't want him or his drunk buddies to wreck the place. Oh, and by the way, she turned to Dallion. If they do it'll be your job to fix it.

I'll do what I can, just don't expect miracles. Dallion said between bites. Something broken in two can't be mended.

The innkeeper gave him a look that screamed I know that, you idiot and sighed. Just finish your food.

Unable to tell whether Hannah was in a bad mood, or that was her normal state, Dallion quickly gobbled up the rest of his food in silence, then quietly stood up and walked up to Jiroh.

For a moment he could almost swear he felt a faint smell of ozone coming from her.

Ready, he said, doing his best to look away from her ears. The way she kept her hair made them all the more visible the dark brown color of her skin contrasting to the whiteness of her hair. She was so anime it wasn't even funny.

Okay, let's go. The fury led the way.

The weather outside was quite fresh. It seemed that mornings in the city were a tad colder than they were in the wilderness. Either that, or the clothes Hannah had given him didn't keep warm. Dallion was tempted to improve them a bit, but decided against it. He still wasn't clear what registration was and getting in trouble with the local authorities on the second day here was a pretty bad idea.

Don't mind Hannah too much, the fury said. She's always grumbly. It takes a while to get used to her, but she's pretty solid.

I gathered that. Cold exterior with a heart of gold.

Sort of. She takes care of her own, as long as you don't cross her or make too much of a mess. Other than that, she'll have your back most of the time. Of course, you'll have to earn it. Jiroh gave him a piercing look. So where are you from?

Oh, a small village in the middle of nowhere. Dallion thought best not to mention any names. There was no telling how much trouble his grandfather had made when he had last been here. The very edge of the empire. Travelling merchants pass by from time to time, but that's about it.

I see. So how did you get your hands on a dartbow?

Dallion froze. How had she found out about that? He had been extremely careful to keep the weapon hidden at all times. Even when he'd gone to bed, he'd kept it nearby. Apparently, there was more to furies than their looks.

I was part of a chainling hunt, he whispered. Not knowing her abilities the closer to the truth he could get, the better. I helped out more than was expected.

As long as you didn't steal it, it's fine. If you have I'd suggest getting rid of it before you register.

I'll keep it. Dallion was adamant. While the way he had gotten it remained somewhat dubious, it was by no means stealing. The Cleric that had been part of the hunting party had given it to him personally, with a noble's blessing no less. It had been on the low, but it was very much official. So, what exactly is this registration? Is it some city initiative to keep an eye on the awakened or something?

The Countess knew about you the moment you entered the city area. Registration is more like joining a guild. You register at one of the awakened guilds and they take care of you. There's a fee involved, but you make that back pretty fast. In a city this size guild houses always have work.

Ah. The description matched the definition of an adventurers guild if Dallion had ever heard one. As a standard gamer, he had his fair share of MMO guild experience. This sounded way better, though. And how much is the fee?

Depends on the guild, but anywhere between five and twenty silvers for entry. Monthlies are usually deducted from your task rewards.

Twenty silver... that's a bit steep. Do they give credit?

No. The old-timers say they used to once, but there were so many abuses that the practice was stopped. Dont worry, though. Hannah gave me enough to cover you. The fury smiled. To be paid back, of course.

Of course. Dallion laughed. Will I be joining your guild?

Sharp, arent you? Youre free to join any guild in the city that will have you, but I have a feeling the place Im taking you would be a better match. If I turn out to be wrong, you can always quit after a month. Thats what the admission price is for.

Nah, I trust you. Its not like Ill be able to decide on my own. Besides, as the fury said, he could always change guilds.

The guildhall in question was quite small. From the outside, it was no different from a residential building. Slightly larger than The Gremlins Timepiece, it boasted four floors, and an incredibly large terrace. Back on Earth, this would have been a swell building for a startup company. Given the universal ways in which business worked, the same practices probably held true here as well.

Cool name, Dallion said, to which Jiroh only shook her head.

The main room, as Dallion had expected, resembled the reception area of an office. There were two counters with an assistant behind each, several boards with notices, and more warning signs than Dallion would have expected. As far as he could make it, was forbidden to fight, start fires, or bring pets in the guild. Alcohol and smoking were also discouraged in large quantities.

Hey, Jiroh! A short, bearded man at one of the counters waved. Given the little Dallion knew about the world, the man could well be a species of dwarf, or just a vertically challenged corporate Viking.

Hi, Estezol. Jiroh made her way to his counter.

A few more of the local guild members waved to the fury as she walked through the room. By the looks of it, all were rather pleased to see her.

No takeout? the bearded man laughed.

Not today. Theres something else Ive brought you, though. The fury put her hand on Dallions soldier. Fresh from the wilderness. He might not look like much, but hes a full awakened.

Yeah, Dallion nodded. Somehow, he had hoped hed be presented in a better light.

Hmm. The bearded man looked Dallion over from head to two. First time in a city? he asked.

Yep.

Whats your level?

Six.

The bearded man looked at Jiroh, who only nodded in confirmation.

Well have to test that, but its a pretty good start. Know the basics?

I think Ill be leaving you now, the fury interrupted, placing a small pouch in Dallions hand. Got some errands to run. Youll be fine from here on. Estezol will take care of you, just dont get on his grumpy side. See you.

Catch you later, Jiroh. And put in an order for tonight. Whatever Aspan has on special.

Will do. Jiroh waved as she walked out of the room. Definitely carefree.

Shes something, isnt she. Estezol sighed. Loads of trouble, but definitely something. How dyou end up with her?

Err, she works at the inn Im staying. It was Dallions policy when in doubt not to get mixed up in relations between people he knew nothing about.

Hannahs place? Lucky you. Ive been kicked out of there more times than I can count. Hannahs got a nasty temper, but the foods always great. Anyway, what skills do you have?

Guard, attack, and music. Dallion paused for a second. Still getting the hang of music.

Estezol whistled.

Thats a rare one. Therell be high demand once you get the hang of it. For the moment, though, Ill put you down as a basic fighter. The man took out a piece of paper and started scribbling something on it with a miniature plume. How long since you awakened?

A bit over a month.

Late bloomer, eh? No worries, though. The fact that youve passed level five is enough to join. Most get stuck at four.

So, how does this work, exactly? I pay my fee and then I get to mend and improve legally?

Laughter filled the air. It was as if Estezol had heard the funniest joke in the world. Even a few of the other guild members joined in. As disturbing as this was, Dallion could see no traces of malice on the mans face. Estezol was just genuinely amused by the question.

Kid, he said after a while. Who said that youve been accepted? Theres more to joining a guild than the admission fee. We must test your skills and your mettle. Only then do you get to earn your emblem.

Chapter 88: Entry Test

The evaluation room was in the basement of the building. When Estezol initially took Dallion there, the boy expected it to be an enormous underground area full of traps and dungeons. Instead, the room he was brought to was only marginally bigger than his room at the inn. Shelves of cubes, spheres, and pyramids covered the walls. In between there was the occasional wooden cabinet with tomes of books, and the occasional scroll. Three people sat in one corner, playing a game that Dallion could only assume to be a mix between dice and poker. Judging by the stack of coins on the table, the old man with somewhat aristocratic clothes was winning.

Hey, sir. Estezol went to the table, holding Dallions application with both hands. Have a new candidate for you.

Cant someone else take care of this? the old man grumbled. Im on a winning streak here.

Even so, he grabbed the piece of paper from the bearded mans hands and started reading. A few seconds in he looked up at Dallion, then back at the piece of paper.

A sixer? After a month? he said in disbelief.

Looking at him, he was one of those people that children imagined a university professor should be, but rarely was old, wrinkly, cleanly shaven, with white hair and elegant old-fashioned attire. Back on Earth, he could have earned a living as a movie extra.

Have you tested him at all?

Only the basics, sir. I was hoping for you to conduct the test.

Hmm. The man glanced at the sheet of paper again. Boy, why did you decide to join our guild?

Actually, Jiroh brought me here, Dallion hesitated for a moment, Sir.

Hardly proper. Still, I guess she had a good take on such things. Estezol, schedule a session for this afternoon. Ill

Ill do the test, a female voice said from behind.

As he turned around, Dallion saw that the entire entrance was filled with a woman clad in full-plate armor. The first thing that came to mind was to compare her with a noble Dame Vesuvia, to be precise. For one thing, every piece of armor looked incredibly expensive. A mere gauntlet was probably worth more than the whole of Dherma village. But that was not all an air of confidence and power surrounded her, creating the unmistakable impression that she was in control of any situation.

March, the old man said, his voice full of contempt. Havent seen you in the basement for quite some time. I thought you had forgotten the way, or are you too busy with your make-belief quests?

Not busier than you and your gambling. The woman snorted. Wasnt that the reason why you were sent down here in the first place?

That was a one time lapse of judgement. The man jumped to his feet, pointing a finger in the womans direction. Chesteon has always been envious of my skills! Unlike you, I worked my way up the ladder. Just because youve been in a few wars doesnt make you special!

The guild master didnt seem to think so. March made her way to the table, her armor clanking at every step, and took Dallions application sheet. A level six, she read. Spread focus, three skills. Faced any area guardians?

A few, Dallion replied. One of the things he hated the most was becoming an excuse for an argument. It was obvious that the old man, and the woman had issues, and now he had become part of them. No matter who got to perform his test, the other would regard it as a betrayal on Dallions part.

Got any achievements?

Some.

Good enough. Estezol, Ill handle this. She went to one shelf and took a pyramid of dark metal.

A pyramid, milady? The bearded man asked, surprised. But hes only

A stern look quickly made him shut up.

Give me your hand, March said as she held the triangle.

Dallion obeyed.

Item Awakening

The reality that the two were transported into was larger than Dallion expected definitely greater than any item realm he had seen. Greco-Roman ruins were all around, covering the hill Dallion was on, spreading into the plains and over a nearby river. Beyond them there was nothing but forests for as far as the eye could see.

The PYRAMID is Level 25

A rectangle hung in the air above March and Dallions heads. This was the highest level Dallion had thought possible. Even the dartbow was nowhere close.

You are in an enormous obsidian domain.

Defeat the guardian to change the PYRAMIDs destiny.

You wont be able to improve that anytime soon, so dont even try, March said, seeing what Dallion was looking at.

Sure In truth, Dallion was more concerned by the fact that an item could be a domain. Apparently after enough levels, even that was possible. One had to wonder who exactly had been the person to level up the pyramid to that state.

Name?

Dallion, he quickly replied. Dallion Darude. Not the best name imaginable, but it was a snap decision. When Estezol had initially asked him back in the entrance room, that was the first family name that had sprung to mind. Given what Dallion had seen in Aspions memories, he thought that using his grandfathers name might be risky.

Dallion. Im March, one of the guilds captains. The grumpy geezer you saw in the training room is Nitiello. Dont let his appearance deceive you. Hes got real skills, even if his life is a wreck. Be careful when youre around him.

Now, tell me what you know. Youre aware of the seven focuses, at least?

Sort of. I know they were given by the Seven Moons and improve an aspect of a persons performance.

The explanation was terrible. If anyone had blabbered that to Dallion, he would have laughed. Instead, the woman just looked at him with her normal stern expression, then smiled.

Each of the Seven Moons represents a focus. An elegant man in what could be described as a black medieval suit emerged. He shared an uncanny resemblance with the old man in the training room from a moment ago. The first Moon is Asteze, the blue moon and moon of awakening. It is through it that chosen can enter the realm of

This isnt a class lecture, Nitiello, March interrupted. The basics will do.

Fine. The man waved a hand with a grumble. To be expected with barbarians such as you. He glared at Dallion. There are seven moons, each moon represents a focus, each focus improves your performance in some way. The end.

Dallion didnt say a word. The explanation was almost as bad as his. He would have preferred to hear a bit more about the history, but there was no chance of that happening. If the old man had been inclined to do so before, he definitely wasnt anymore.

There are also twelve sets of skills, Nitiello continued. Each grants you the ability to perform feats in certain areas. In the awakened realms, each skill exists as a physical representation of itself. A buckler for guard skills, a sword for attack, and so on. He turned to March. Was that brief enough for you? He crossed his arms.

COMBAT INITIATED

Green markers appeared all over Dallions body. He could see green lines connecting Marchs fists to his chest. Before he could react, the woman had already punched him in the stomach, sending him flying several steps off.

Ooof! Dallion managed to say as the air was knocked out of his lungs.

MODERATE WOUND

Health has been decreased by 10%

The speed of the attack was incredible. Even so, Dallion quickly came back to his senses. As sudden as this was, it was only one hit. The important thing was not to allow any more. Instinct took over, giving way to caution. Without hesitation, he drew his dartbow and aimed at the woman. To his astonishment, she wasnt there anymore.

Not bad, he heard a voice from his left. Somehow March had managed to get there in less than a fraction of a second. Youve definitely faced something larger than a pebble.

In his minds eye, Dallion saw her rush toward him. Two options came to mind defend or attack. Knowing he couldnt match her speed, the boy chose the latter, shooting a bolt in her direction. No sooner had he done so, than March dashed to the side, completely avoiding his attack.

Good, youve got a dartbow.

Dartbows are extremely versatile ranged weapons, Nitiello said, observing everything from a safe distance. Not only do they provide a vast range advantage, but they could be used in close combat as well in more ways than one.

Dallion didnt listen, shooting bolt after bolt. According to his attack markers each was supposed to hit the woman dead center, and yet each time she evaded it with such ease as if it were nothing.

Wasteful. March stopped in place. In an actual battle, youd never have this many chances.

Dallion shot another bolt, then rushed after it, following the marker footprints. Halfway through the first sequence he braced, expecting a counterattack. To his surprise, none followed. Maybe the woman was testing him.

Time slowed down. Pressing on, he completed a second sequence, then a third. His attack took him less than a few feet from March. Right now, she was wide open a perfect target for attack. Experience had taught Dallion, though, not to rush things. Only after completing the fourth sequence, he leapt to her other side and shot as many bolts as the time slow would let him. Three bolts split the air, hitting their target.

Got you! Dallion shouted triumphantly. However, no rectangle emerged depicting the result of his attack. It was as if nothing had happened.

Not used to echoes, are you? A voice asked behind him. Green markers enveloped him. Moments later, a powerful punch sent him flying once more.

CRITICAL WOUND

Health has been decreased by 20%

You cannot use awakened abilities for 1 minute.

All markers disappeared. Dallion tried to twist around, but found that his action was way slower than it was supposed to.

MODERATE WOUND

Health has been decreased by 10%

A punch tore the dartbow out of his hand, leaving it flying in several dozen feet away. As it did, the holster disappeared from Dallions hip, replaced by a scabbard. It was back to having a short sword.

MODERATE WOUND

Health has been decreased by 10%

A second punch drove him to the ground. Things had gotten really bad, really fast. Without the markers, Dallion had to guess as to the defense sequence. In the past he had performed it several times in the real world, but now doubt reared its ugly head.

Too insecure! March shouted, leaping at him with the goal of performing an air attack.

The blade split the air only to be caught midway by Marchs hand.

Youre dead, she said, looking Dallion straight in the eyes. Also, youve passed. She let go of his weapon and helped him up.

Are you sure? Nitiello approached. His technique is sloppy, and he has way too many holes in his training. Hell have to learn everything from scratch. He cant even face echoes properly.

Maybe, but hes got this far in only a month. Also, he has the ability to learn.

Chapter 89: Guild Rookie

Dallion returned to the real world, still gasping for air. The test had proven to be far more exhausting than he had expected. At first, he thought it had been deceptively easyhe had faced bigger opponents for longer amounts of time, and with fewer points in body. With March, though, the exhaustion seemed to have a delayed effect, reaching its peak minutes after the fight was over.

Given his poor performance, Dallion wasnt surprised at the stares he got. What surprised him was the silence that followed. From his experience back on Earth, usually this was the point at which the mocking began. There was no mocking here.

Hes good to go, March said, returning the pyramid to its place on the shelf. Get the paperwork done. Did he pay the fee?

Err, yes. Estezol straightened up, snapping from his momentary daze. Yes, maam he has.

Good. Finish up, give him an emblem. March glanced at Dallion, then smiled. And give him something to eat. My treat.

You mean he made it? Nitiello asked, eyes as wide as teacups.

Hes rough around the edges, but hell do. You can chat with your echo, if you want the details. Without another word, the woman left the room, leaving only silence behind her.

All glances continued to be focused on Dallion.

So, about that food? Dallion broke the silence with a smile. Anything particular in mind or do I get to choose?

The questions had their effect. It was as if a temporary enchantment had been removed. With a wince the trio returned to their dice gambling. Nitiello shook his head briefly in disappointment, then unceremoniously ignored Dallion as if the boy wasnt there. Estezol immediately got the hint, for he grabbed Dallion by the hand and quickly dragged him into the corridor.

Youve no idea how lucky you are, he whispered once the two were clear from the training room. March hasnt passed anyone from the first try in years.

Is that good or bad?

Both, to be honest. Usually, she fails candidates a few times to test their determination. The fact that she didnt, means she saw something in you. Where did you come from again?

Oh, a small village at the edge of the empire. Dallion tried to be as dismissive as possible. I doubt youve heard it. Nothing happens there. Even merchants avoid it.

Any noble lineage?

Err, not that I know of Dallion lied. Well, technically it wasnt a lie. His family back on Earth didnt have a drop of noble blood in their veins. Also, being a village chief wasnt technically a noble.

You must have been blessed by the Seven. Id suggest you dont tell anyone about your trial, but its already too late?

In what way? Dallion didnt like the sound of that.

Rumors always surround anyone accepted by March. The fact that shes shown a special liking towards you is bound to cause certain he paused for a moment, searching for the appropriate word. curiosity. Adzorg will probably share the fact with everyone who goes to the training room.

Adzorg?

Captian Nitiello Adzorg, the bearded man clarified. Despite the exchange you witnessed, he was a big deal in the guild. Still is. For one thing, hes the one who made all the training items in the room. Granted, hes been a bit out of it lately, but have no illusions, hes not just some random old man.

That explained the echo Dallion had seen during his test fight. It was extremely well crafted, and unlike the echoes hed had experience with lately, very useful. As it turned out, the real purpose of echoes was to serve as guides and assistantssomething like a Star Trek hologram. Dallion, of course, hadnt asked whether they could be used for punishment. That was one answer he preferred not to the know for the moment.

As they reached the first floor of the building, Dallion instinctively turned towards the main room hed been led from.

Not that way, Estezol grabbed his arm. Were going to the garden.

The name sounded suspiciously like another awakened domain, but turned out to be an actual small garden in the back of the building. Several people were there, guild members by the looks of it, chatting and eating at small wooden tables on the grass.

Estezol took Dallion to one of the two tables under a gazebo and sat down. Moments later, a silent mountain of muscles approached.

The usual for me, Estezol said, not in the least intimidated by the seven-foot giant. And a full course for the rookie. Hes had the March treatment.

The large waiter smirked, then left without a word. In Dallions mind he could see the giant breaking tables with his hands or head for fun. Hopefully, hed never have to witness such a sight.

Normally, Id treat you to something better, being the first time and all, but all the good cooks are asleep at this time of day.

Well, let me officially congratulate you on joining the Icepicker Guild. Id have done so earlier, but you caught us all off guard. Now that several minutes had passed since the March incident, the short, bearded man had regained his oratory skills. The way he talked made Dallion think of a car salesman on TV. There was no denying, though, that he did it with a lot more charm. Now, keep in mind that the first few months youll only be a trial member.

Dallion started opening his mouth to express his thanks, only to get interrupted before he could utter half a word.

I know, I know. Estezol sighed, more theatrically than necessary. Its just a rule thing. Youve nothing to worry about, though. Almost every temp has become a permanent member soon enough. As long as you dont have serious problems with the law or the city guard, youre in.

It was interesting to note that there was a distinction between the two. Dallion made a mental note to learn the reason for this as soon as possible.

Once youre done eating, Ill give you a temporary emblem. Keep it with you at all times and dont lose it. Its a guarantee that youre part of the guild. In a week or so, when your mentor is decided, youll be given an individual one.

Nice. That sounded more like it. Think Ill be in Marchs group?

Captains dont pick newbies, Estezol laughed. Even lieutenants rarely get to pick. Usually, the old dogs get to pick and choose. Its pretty much luck, though all of them are pretty good. Some are harsher than others. Theyll take care of you during your trial period. When they feel youre ready, youll officially become a junior member.

The conversation quickly focused on the further workings of the guild. As much as Dallion expected it to follow the game guild and fantasy book practices, it turned out that there was a much more corporate tilt than he had expected. From what he could make out, while the guild master ran the guild along with two vices, he answered to a number of financial backers. According to Estezol, the backers never meddled with guild affairs, but expected a steady income from guild activities.

Beneath the guild master were the captains, who organized large-scale missionsrealm runs, as they called them. In addition, the captains had a field of guild specialization. March was responsible for arcane realm missions, Nitiello was formally in charge of guild training. There were several more captains, whom Estezol mentioned in passing, all relating to areas that Dallion didnt need to know at this point. Every captain had a few aids, or lieutenants, who assisted in the work. Beneath were the common members divided in three groups: senior, normal, and junior. In addition, a complex system of ranks and roles determined a persons significance and pay in relation to the guild.

Dallion, like every newbie, was going to start as a level one pack rat, or a support member as was the official title. His role would be to carry things from place to place, both in the awakened realms and in real life, and learn the ropes. Also, there were the scouts, the forgers, the fighters, the orators, and the menders, to name only the basic ones. Dallions music skills, once developed, could easily earn him a spot in the orator group.

Fifteen minutes into the conversation, the mountain of muscles arrived with a platter of food for Dallion, and a stiff drink in a small cup for Estezol. Without waiting for an invitation, Dallion started eating.

And the level doesnt depend on the role? He asked after a few mouthfuls.

Levels only apply to the rank. Juniors dont have ranks, but the rest have seven eachone for each moon. When you choose your role, you start as a level one. Based on how well you do your tasks, you go up, until you reach level seven. At that point, you have your master quest. When you pass that, youre a senior.

And when I become a senior level seven? Dallion asked eagerly. Do I become a lieutenant?

When youre a level seven, you become an elite. Any senior member can be a lieutenant. Its more of the captains choice.

Elite it had a nice ring to it. All Dallion had to do was rise fifteen ranks to get there.

And hows this related to my awakening level?

Hmm. Estezol finished the rest of his drink, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Thats slightly more complicated.

Theres no set rule, but in general you need to be a double digit to become a senior guild member. There have been exceptions. Sometimes a prodigy appears who blasts the competition away before they reach level ten. Spellcrafters are like that, but good luck running into a mage. Estezol snorted.

Guilds dont like them much?

Oh, quite the contrary. Guilds would love to have anyone with spellcraft. Between the Order, the Imperial Academy, and the Imperial court, there arent many left. If you had any such skills, we wouldnt be talking right now. More than likely Id have to bow in your presence. The bearded man laughed.

Dallion joined in, although didnt get the joke.

Bottom line. Every guild has a different value. Some guilds focus on earning money, others to increase their influence in the city. We pick up the things left behind. We are the ones who pick up fallen ice, and we stick up for one another."

With that, the conversation about guild structure was pretty much over. The topic shifted to life in the city itself, including several must see areas. Judging by Estezols description, most of them werent places hed visit, and the rest were places that Hannah would kick him out if he did.

After half an hour, once Dallion had finished all of his food, he returned to the entrance room with Estezol, where he was given his very own guild emblem. The emblem was no larger than a coin, stamped with the crest of the guild on one side and an empty hourglass on the other, but to Dallion it felt like getting his drivers license. The simple piece of bluish silver gave him the right to mend and improve within the city limits. He could start working for Hannah now, as well as earn enough money for himself. But that wasnt all! The guild hadnt just given him a license to earn money; it had given him the means to learn more about his awakening powers and develop them under the guidance of others.

Chapter 90: Dinnertime Mending Orders

Dal! the innkeeper shouted. Got a chipped mug here.

Be right there, Dallion said, making his way to the table in question.

Being an awakened in the city had turned out to be very different. Back in the village, people were in awe of the achievement, even if they were afraid to show it openly. Here, Dallion was treated like a Rockstar, or at least like someone with IT skills after a major systems update. Non stop people

would slam mugs and glasses, kick chairs, and occasionally carve up something on tables with the full expectation that Dallion would come by and fix it.

On his end, he didnt complain. The room and board were more than enough to compensate him, not to mention that Hannah had already given him an advance payment in the form of his guild registration fee.

Wheres the patient? Dallion asked, in humoristic fashion. A table of six looked at him with expectant smiles as one of them pushed a cracked glass to the edge. Oh.

It was another test. People had been doing that for the most part of the night, mostly for their amusement. This group seemed friendly enough. All of them seemed to be in their mid-twenties, wearing what Dallion had come to call renaissance casual, and armed with small weapons.

Think youre up for it? a black-haired woman asked.

Fixing an item, especially made of glass, usually took six hours and half awakened time. In most cases Dallion had to deal with the occasional chip. This glass was cracked to such an extent that it was almost split in two. There was no doubt that the damage was deliberate. Then again, that wasnt Dallions concern. Triggering his awaken power, he entered the glass and started to work.

As expected, the mending labyrinth was at one percent. The slightest amount of additional pressure would have destroyed the glass beyond repair. As things currently stood, the task of mending it wasnt trivial either. For hours Dallion roamed the transparent labyrinth, searching for pieces and the spot to put them in.

Once done, Dallion spent another four hours napping. That was one of the advantages of mendingno one could tell whether he slept on the job or not. As far as the real world was concerned, an instant had passed either way.

To tell you the truth, Dallion said upon returning to the real world, I dont see anything wrong with it.

He handed it back to the woman at the ovations of the table.

Can you improve it? A bulky man next to the woman asked.

Improve it. Dallion put his hand on his chin, as if he were thinking. For that he paused. Across the filled room, from behind the counter, Hannah whispered something.

Make their day. The words left Hannahs lips, too quiet to be heard by anyone else. Thanks to his improved perception, Dallion got the message perfectly.

For that Ill need a moment of concentration. He reached out and grabbed the glass, staring at it with an intense glare.

Come on! The man laughed. Awakening doesnt work that way.

Item Awakening

Once more, Dallion entered the glass. This was the first time he'd face a glass guardian. Given the shape of the item, Dallion assumed it would be a golem or colossus of some sort. To his surprise, the glass turned out to be a crystal bird with glass shards instead of feathers. Upon seeing him, the creature spread its wings, clearly indicating that it didn't appreciate his meddling. Given that the life of a glass in a tavern was harsh to say the least, Dallion didn't blame it for disliking people.

Thankfully, it hadn't initiated combat, probably because Dallion had mended it recently. That was a relief and also a good excuse for him to exercise his music skills.

Blue markers of various shades covered the guardian's head and chest, as well as the strings of the lyre.

MUSIC skills activated.

Follow the suggested markers for best efficiency.

That was all and good, though some details would have been nice. The only thing Dallion knew from his mother was that music had the ability to play on others' emotions—people and guardians alike. Doing it properly, on the other hand

Let's try this. Picking the string that matched the guardian's heart, Dallion played a note.

As the string vibrated, so did the glass bird's heart. For a second the guardian froze still. Its wings then folded, and it took a step forward.

Go on, Dallion smiled. Maybe he was finally getting the hang of this?

Step by step the guardian approached in tact with the notes Dallion played. Soon the distance between them was reduced by half. Just a little more and

COMBAT INITIATED

Damn it! Dallion hissed. And just when he thought he was making progress. Habit took over. Before the guardian could take another step, Dallion drew his dartbow and shot a bolt at its head. A loud shattering sound filled the air. Glass fragments rained down, covering the floor.

GLASS Level increased

The GLASS has been improved to quartz

Dallion sighed. Another improvement and still no skill increase. The battle was easy, but then again it would have been shameful if he had lost to a common level one glass. Hopefully, next time he'd achieve a victory using his lyre.

Whoa! Look at that! One of the customers pointed at Dallion's hands. The glass he was holding was no longer fully transparent, now acquiring a tinted amberfish look. You're the real thing!

Only because youre the best customers. Dallion smiled despite his disappointment. Sadly, I must now rest for a bit. He placed the glass on the table.

Sure, sure. The group was barely paying attention to him, focused more on the new glass.

Dallion took the opportunity to make his way to the counter. As expected, a plate of food was waiting for him there.

Good work, Hannah said. You didnt have to go overboard.

Thats not overboard. Its just a simple improvement. Up to a moment ago, he himself didnt know what the results would be. Is it like this every night?

Usually, it isnt this crowded. Word spreads fast when a tavern hires an awakened. The first few days everyone flocks to see the results.

That explained the number of cracked and chipped glasses.

Also, theres a few guildies thatve come to check out the competition.

Where? Dallion looked over his shoulder. Using his perception, he scanned the faces and reactions of everyone in the crowd. At first everything seemed normal, then he started seeing themseveral men and women who had barely touched their food, looking at Dallion with dedicated intensity.

I doubt theyll cause trouble, but best keep an eye out, Hannah said loud enough for the rest of the awakened to hear. Some like to start fights even in a tavern.

At those words several of the people in question stood up and left, leaving a few coins on the tables. Jiroh quickly passed by and snatched them.

Same thing every time, Hannah sighed. Are you well enough to go on?

Mending, sure. Improving might be tricky. Dallion had only improved two items today, but didnt want to create the impression that he was easy to boss around. Thankfully, the innkeeper seemed to fall for his lie.

Just mending, then. And dont bother with the tables. Youll be fixing those tomorrow morning.

That suited him quite well. Finishing his food, and a mug of water, Dallion returned to his normal duties. The good thing was that even when drunk, the patrons followed a certain etiquette. No one bothered him during meals, and no one urged him to mend their item before someones elses.

By midnight, Dallion had mended a total of a hundred and seventeen glasses, forty-three mugs, three dishes, nine daggersfor which the patrons had individually paid Hannahand two stool legs. It was quite a lot of work that only took one second in the real world. Now, Dallion understood what his grandfather had meant when he told him that awakened kept the city in a good state. It was an exhausting job, but so far, an amusing one, also it beat having to repair cobblestones.

Hanging in there? Jiroh asked during one of Dallions breaks. As the only barmaid in the inn, she was remarkably energetic. Dallion hadnt seen her rush once, and yet she managed to get all the orders taken in and the food delivered without fail.

Barely. You?

Im a fury, this is nothing.

Ah. Dallion nodded.

As he did, she moved her head closer.

Youve no idea what that means, do you? she whispered.

Not a clue.

One day you might find out. Bottom line is that I dont get tired like humans. If I did this for a week straight, then maybe Ill break a sweat. Sort of like you. How much time have you spent in awakened realms?

Tonight? Dallion tried to remember. About three weeks, give or take. Time was starting to blend together. Back in Dherma village, Dallion had spent at most half a week mending items when he first tried to get a hang of his powers.

Dont worry, youre doing fine. The fury winked, then returned to helping Hannah serve the customers. A few minutes later, Dallion returned to work as well. Looking around for chips and cracks, he was just about to head to a table in the corner to fix a slightly bent fork, when the door to the inn opened.

Normally, such an occurrence would merit little attention. People had been coming and going since the late afternoon. The person who had appeared, though, was someone special. Dallion knew that because he had seen him once before.

Captain Adzorg, Hannah said in such a polite and cheerful tone that Dallion felt genuine concern. You didnt tell me youd be passing by. I would have saved your table.

Now, now, the white-haired man said with a warm smile. Theres no need for that. Im sure Id be fine anywhere. He looked about, scanning for a suitable table. There by the window, for example. As he said it, two people stood up from the table in question and quickly made way.

Of course. Your usual, I assume?

Hmm. Surprise me. The man nodded and went to his seat.

Psst! Hanna made a sign to Dallion to approach. Go there and mend that table. The chairs too if you have to.

I thought you told me not to touch the tables. Dallion arched a brow.

Dont be a smartass and do it! She hissed, trying to keep her voice down as much as possible. And if he asked you to mend or improve anything of his, do it right away. Got it? No performance act!

Dallion knew that the old man was a big shot in the guild he had just joined, but that didnt amount to much. Or did it? From what the boy could tell, the city was overflowing with awakened guilds of various sizes. Why would the Icepickers be any different?

Still, Hannah was the boss, so Dallion diligently made his way to the old mans table.

Evening, sir, Dallion said, placing his hand on the table as he did. An instant later, all marks and deformities in the wood were gone. Nice to

Sit, the captain said in the same tone of voice, Dallions high school principal used when someone was in trouble. Understandably, Dallion quickly complied. You did quite the performance earlier today. I had a talk with the training echo.

Well, sir, I only

Your form was atrocious. It was like watching an elephant on a tightrope. And your battle strategy Caption Nitiello Adzorg sighed. Headless chickens have more sense. Have you really won any fights? Or did you constantly rely on your dartbow?

Level three. Well, it shows. Your knowledge of the basics is so lacking that its a wonder how you havent had your powers sealed. And dont get me started about your handling of the dartbow. When the weapon was first constructed, it was believed to be so devastating that it would end all wars. And you use it like a slingshot. But there was a long pause. You seem to have impressed March enough to pass you, so Im willing to give you a chance.

The man placed a small ring on the table. Dallion looked at it, then cautiously picked it up. There was nothing special about it, just a small silver band of metal with a symbol of a scroll on the inside.

Im giving you a library. If you want to get ahead, better read up. You might be a natural talent, but that makes you nothing more than an oddity. And the thing about oddities is that in time people lose interest in them.