

Leveling up 131

Chapter 131: Creatures of the Star

The creatures class was enough to frighten anyone. As far as the world was concerned, the star was the antithesis of the Seven Moons. Said to be weaker than any of them, the star was way stronger than anything else in existence and the malice to crush anything it was given the opportunity to. Supposedly all evil things in the world namely chainlings and the likewere creations of the Crippled Star and like it, had the sole goal of hurting and destroying as much as they could.

When Dallion saw the soul suckers flying towards him, he thought that they would merge together and try to squish the party like bugs. Instead, they did the exact opposite, bursting into a wave of miniature bugs that leapt forward like fleas.

Hold steady! one of the fighters in the group said, calling a crossbow. Barely aiming, he squeezed the trigger, launching a multitude of bolts at the soul suckers. A blast followed shortly after. For a moment it seemed as if the weapon had done its job, raising a whitish cloud of dust over the entire area of impact. Moments later, though, black insects poured through the layer of white heading on towards the group.

Defense markers appeared everywhere, all of them providing only partial protection. In his mind Dallion could see his awakened self be devoured by the termite-mosquitos. In a fraction of a second, his instincts took over, grabbing his armadil shield. Dallions initial goal was to use its special skill to cover his head like a helmet. Something very different happened. Sensing the situation, the shield elements stretched in all directions, creating a large circular barrier in front of him, and that wasnt all! Once the insectsand everything else in frontwas blocked from view, the shield segments continue to grow, capturing Dallion in a ball-like cocoon.

Shield, did you do this? Dallion asked, his left arm stretched forward. Technically, the shield remained strapped to him, but in truth it was he who was held prisoner by it.

The sounds of thousand little legs scurrying all over the surface quickly told Dallion that staying here wasnt the worst choice. The occasional scream and swearing that came from outside only confirmed that suspicion.

Thanks, Dallion whispered in relief.

While slightly uncomfortable, the shield had probably saved his life, or at the very least a large chunk of health. The sound of fighting outside continued, then intensified, until a sudden thud shook the ground.

Think its safe? Dallion asked. In the means of an answer a crack emerged behind him, slowly growing as the shield returned to its normal state.

The battlefield was in much better shape that was to be expected with the exception of the layer of sticky black goo on the ground. It felt as if Dallion was walking in ink.

Nice shield, Vend said.

The rest of the team were alive, although they had suffered moderate amounts of damage. Bel had lost close to half her health, and a few others were even worse.

That's why we don't react, Vend said loudly. Creatures are not only territorial, their entire purpose is to protect the item. That doesn't always mean to prevent you from moving forward. Get a few minutes rest and clean up. We go on after that.

As the group did just that, Vend and Spike moved a short distance away. It was obvious they were discussing something, but the way they were whispering prevented anyone from hearing exactly what was said.

Good reaction, Falkner said to Dallion as he approached. And nice shield. Where did you buy it from?

You don't want to know, Dallion said beneath his breath. The less he told anyone about the shield, the better.

It's a good one. The boy didn't get the hint. Must have cost a lot. Ability armor is pricey. Gets the job done, though.

Yep. That it does. Dallion glanced at Vend, then moved closer to Bel. To no one's surprise, Falkner did so as well. Think they are talking about the creatures?

Probably. Bel was suspicious about it as well. They did warn us about the level. This one and next.

And level eleven, Dallion added. I don't get why they don't clear the levels completely. Would be much easier in the long run.

Manpower, Falkner said. This is a small guild. They don't have hundreds of people taking part in an exploration. Most of the time it's probably three groups in total.

Can't be that few, Bel said. Even with just three people per level gate that makes over thirty.

Dallion didn't say a thing, but he had just thought of a very easy way around it. Also, it made a lot of sense. The guild didn't have to leave members to guard the levels, they could simply use echoes. Of everyone Dallion had met so far, there was no telling how many of them were people. After all, echoes had the same thoughts and behavior as the original did. In that case, why not skills as well? The reason why so many people had been gathered and sent to do the search was because the echoes wouldn't stand a chance against a creature that was moderately strong. That also explained why they were losing people on the eighth level. The casualties were of echoes, but echoes which were necessary for the exploration to go on. Having lost a whole team of people seriously threatened everything that the guild had achieved in regards to this item, and that was probably expensive.

The guilds using echoes, Dallion said after a few seconds of silence. That's why they've sent us. However, they are worried there might be other echoes here as well.

Other echoes? Falkner asked.

The Crippled Star, Dallion whispered. As he did, the expressions on Bel and Falkner's faces instantly changed. This wasn't something they wished to discuss, almost as if they had a limiting echo. Thanks to his music skill, Dallion could see that wasn't the case the reason they didn't want to

discuss it further was because they were scared. Even so, Dallion felt he had to. The soul suckers were made by it, which could mean theres something else as well. Or maybe someone.

Dont even joke about that, Bel hissed. No one would chain themselves to that monstrosity. Especially not in this guild.

Dallion suspected that was what every guild said, although in this case he was inclined to agree. There were enough people who were both skilled and honest to let that happen. However, it didnt have to have happened now. Back during Dallions battle in Dherma village, Aspion had shared that he had remained imprisoned for decades. Could the guild scouts have stumbled upon something similar upon entering the twelfth level?

They dont have to be from the guild, Dallion whispered, then went back to setting up his gear. The sudden attack had caused a lot of the fighters to summon several of the items he was carrying and now he had to take them back again.

After a few more minutes, the team was on its way again. The vigilance level was high, and thankfully, there were no other enemy sightings.

As they walked, Dallion noticed that they were directed at one of the ceiling columns at the far end of the area. Upon reaching it, Vend made the sign for everyone to stop.

Give me the moss. He approached.

Dallion did as he was asked, handing the pouch over.

Smoke from the moss opens the gate to the next level, Vend explained. Black jade honey also works, but thats getting difficult to find the more creatures on the level we kill. He placed the contents of the moss on the ground and then summoned a lantern.

Smoke came out of the moss as it was placed in the lantern, changing the color of the light to a deep blue. The instant the smoke touched the column, the entire structure cracked open, revealing the spiral to the lower level.

Why arent there any guards here? Dallion asked.

Too dangerous, Vend replied. Youll see when you get to the next level. Once we make it through there, its safe walking to eleven. For that well be making a slight change. I and Dallion will be taking the lead. Everyone else, follow us in the usual order. Packrats at the back.

Ready? the party leader asked.

Dallion nodded.

The descent had hardly begun when Nox started showing signs of terror once more. This time the reaction was much stronger, pushing the cat completely into a corner of Dallions awakening room.

When we get down there, I want you to use music, Vend whispered as they were making their way down. Just to tell me what you see.

Me? Dallion played coy. I thought that was strictly forbidden.

The seventh level is one of the mystery floors. The guild doesnt know exactly whats there, nor whether itll attack. Youll see when we get there, but theres a reason we cant clear that floor. Think of this as training. I want to see what youre able to do on your own.

Its the star, isnt it? Dallion went straight for the question he wanted to ask.

No, but thats not important. Sphere items sometimes have certain safeguards in them. Consider them a lock to prevent certain things from happening.

Youre being vague.

And youre not even supposed to be here. The only party missions you were supposed to see were sanitation and exploration. Everything else was supposed to wait until you successfully passed your selection trial. It was either luck or misfortune, but here we are, and I want to take the chance to prepare you a bit of things to come. You think I dont know what your plans are?

Dallion didnt answer.

At this stage of development theres only one plan. Gather some good gear, save enough money to enter an awakening shrine, then break through the second level cap. Weve all been there, weve all done it. The issue is that youre going too fast.

A faint red light became noticeable, coming from below.

The floor were entering is called the feeding grounds. We suspect there will be another like it at level fifteen or sixteen if we ever get that far.

Why is it called that? Dallion asked, despite his internal reluctance.

Because the only way to open the next gate is to catch a creature of a specific type and take it to the gate. It doesnt matter that the guardian has been defeated. This is the only way.

Ill do what is expected, Dallion said. But Ill want some answers.

Find the missing people and you'll have them. Remember, this is as important to me as it is to you. The only difference is that I know what I'm doing and for the moment you don't.

Chapter 132: Water Equine

Using music skills continuously was more difficult than originally imagined. Using it to focus on a creature or two was fine, even interesting. Doing so non-stop in an environment that was full of living creatures was painful, to say the least.

After five minutes, Dallion felt as if his temples were being crushed. A few minutes more, and the pain had increased to the point he felt as if a set of nails were piercing through his skull. Even so, he gritted his teeth and kept on looking.

The seventh level was very different from everything he had seen so far. Large glowing plants covered parts of the ground and ceiling, like multicolored anemones. Most of them emanated calm, although now and again one would resonate with anger and pain. Those were the ones that the group had to look out for, and at the same time the ones they had to get near to.

According to Vend, the creature they had to catch fed on the anemones and only if they captured it alive would the gate to the next level reveal itself. Since this was a closed system, Dallion immediately knew that this level gave the guild a set number of tries before they had to leave and start everything from scratch. Since there was no spawning in awakened realms as far as Dallion knew, each passing through the level permanently decreased the number of creatures, and since they also acted as keys, that limited the number of times the gate could open.

Need a rest? Vend asked.

Dallion closed his eyes. To say he was feeling unwell was an understatement.

Just a bit, he said. I wasn't able to see any creatures. Are you sure they're here? On that note, Dallion hadn't been able to see any white rectangle relating to the anemones either. Maybe it was because they were plants, although, in that case, how was he able to see their emotions. Either he was getting better at music skills, or he was really weak when it came to perception.

They're here. Sooner or later a pack of them will attack. We must find one before that.

Won't that be easier? Bel asked, playing with her knives.

It will, but

The more we kill, the fewer times we'll be able to pass through here. Dallion interrupted, trying to keep the level of his smugness on the low side. The truth was that he liked showing off his smarts, especially since he'd been the one catching up for so long. It's a sort of a lock that makes sure a group of people doesn't try what we're doing now.

Bel glared at him, with an expression shouting teacher's pet, but said nothing. In part, that was due to Dallion, still having his eyes shut.

Interesting security system, Dallion thought. And to think there were two times as many levels until the item was completely cleared. When initially learning about the awakened powers, Dallion saw them as an equivalent of a fighting game: awakened versus guardian in which each side aimed to defeat the other by hook or by crook. Now, it was starting to become more like a strategy with resource management.

Listen Up, Vend shouted. Were splitting up. Spike will take everyone to the end point. Ill go find the key with Dallion.

I want to join in too, Falkner said, to no ones surprise. He was the type who wanted to be heavily involved in the action, not to mention close to anyone who had even a tangential relation to March.

Stay with Spike, Vend said in a firm tone. We wont take long.

There was a moment of tension in the air. It only lasted a few seconds, but every awakened felt it. Falkner was not pleased with the response. At some point he would no doubt do something about it, but that time wasnt now. Looking Vend in the eyes, he gave a single slow nod, then joined Spike, who only smirked in response. Shortly after, the main part of the group got ready to depart. Dallions excess gear was distributed among the other packrats, very much to their annoyance. No doubt there would be a few temporary grudges, but even they had to admit Dallion had skills others didnt.

No fighting, Vend shouted as the group set off. The creatures are more valuable than you.

Spike only raised his hand back still turned, and waved. Half a minute later they had vanished, hidden by the horizon of anemones.

How long do you think theyll hold a grudge? Dallion asked once he and Vend were alone.

They wont. If anything, you staying there makes things awkward.

That was a response Dallion didnt expect. In what way?

Everyone knows that you completed the selection trial, or rather that you should have completed it. Your failure to complete it solo let them relax that you arent another monster chosen by March. That doesnt mean that they feel at ease around you. Youre still too dangerous.

Dallion blinked. Dangerous? That had to be a joke. Everyone hed seen so far was stronger and not only double digits like Eury and the siblings. Awakened of his level could easily win against him in a fight. Falkner, Bel, even Arthurows would likely pummel him into the ground if it came to a serious battle.

Youre like a tiger kitten. Clumsy, reckless, still learning the world, and most important of all unable to control its claws. Watching you is like watching a diamond in the rough that wants to polish itself into perfection by rubbing against every piece of rock it sees. You have the potential, you even have the right ideas, but you always manage to stop halfway. I dont know what it is, but its as if you stubbornly want to remain where you are.

Thats bull crap. Dallion crossed his arms. Ive been pushing myself to enter double digit territory non-stop! When Im not here doing guild jobs, Im working at the inn or training.

I know. Youre also saving so you can visit an awakening shrine. Its an improvement, but youre still overlooking the small things. Vend sighed. You keep using your music skills in the most harmful way. You attacked a Mirror Widow without even a basic idea what it does. Youve managed to get some of the best gear there is and you still use it as a hammer.

Dallion took a deep breath. Even back on Earth, he hated being criticized, especially for no reason. Thats one of the reasons he wasnt into school sports too much. It wasnt that he had any problem in being shouted at or even against the criticism, it was that some people just liked to pick on him while ignoring others doing the same.

Dallion tensed up. Vend was still going on with his tirade, pointing out mistake after mistake in everything that Dallion had done in the last week. However, other than the two of them, there wasn't anyone there.

With his headache reduced, Dallion did just that. Strictly speaking, he would have done it even if his head was pounding.

There were a lot of emotions visible in Vend. Going through them, Dallion found that the most relevant wasn't disappointment as he had expected it to be but enthusiasm and encouragement. The voice had been right. Could it be that this passed for encouragement in this world? Apparently yes. It reminded Dallion of what Havoc had told him during the hunt.

I don't remember you being so hard on Falkner, Dallion interrupted, just to check on that hypothesis. Falkner's untouchable. He has nothing to worry about. You, do. And if you can't understand that, you'll never make it past the level ten trial.

Using all the strength of will in his possession, Dallion smiled.

I guess we'll have to find out, won't we? He looked past Vend. His music skills had shown that another few anemones had changed their emotional emanations from calm to in pain. A few more are hurting. He pointed in the direction, then stopped using his music skills. I wasn't able to see much of anything else.

Okay. Vend looked at where Dallion was pointing. Well spring there. Are you in a condition to do any fighting?

Yeah, Dallion lied. It wasn't a true lie, although with his headache the last thing he wanted to do now was to fight against something he had never seen before.

Without any further questions or explanations, Vend rushed forward.

It quickly became clear that keeping pace with an elite was impossible. Dallion had barely passed a third of the distance to the anemone by the time Vend had gotten there.

The pain coming from the anemone had started to subside. Vends focus, however, had intensified, and also there was another presence that Dallion hadnt seen until now.

Dont attack! Dallion shouted, but it was too late. Vend had already drawn his weapon and charged forward. The speed was so great that the red markers appeared several instants behind the elites steps.

COMBAT INITIATED

It took two seconds for Dallion to reach the scene. In that time, a few dozen blows had already been exchanged. Or rather, it was Vend issuing the blows. Careful not to knock out the creature entirely, Vend only used strikes and kicks to stop its actions, keeping it in the same spot. His precision was outright terrifying. As for the creature

Species: Equine

Class: Water

Statistics: 100% HP

Skills:

- **Water Jet**

- **Scale defense**

Weak spots: Tail

Get on the other side, Vend ordered. Dont let it escape.

Do we have to fight it? he asked. Cant we just bring it with us?

As he asked, the emotions of the horse changed drastically, showing hope.

Were offering a draw! Dallion shouted. Help us get to the next level and we wont hurt you.

As if to mock him, one of Vends kicks landed in the neck area of the equine.

What are you doing? Vend took a step back, still blocking the creatures escape paths. Red cones started from his hands and feet, surrounding the equine from all sides.

You told me to focus on the little things, well Im focusing. Dallion took a step forward. A draw and you come with us to the guardians chamber?

In his mind, Dallion heard Vend criticizing him again, explaining how item creatures arent intelligent. That never played out, however. The man stood there, calmly, ready to attack at the drop of a pin, but completely silent.

What do you say? Dallion asked. If the situation wasnt as tense, he could have used his lyre to convince the creature as he had convinced the general a few days ago. Doing so now, though, would only scare the beast. Or maybe there was another way?

We dont really want to fight. Dallion said, his voice vibrating with calm as he spoke. His minds eye saw the breath reach the marker level, indicating he had to continue with the next set of sounds. We just want to reach the next level.

The timing was perfect. Dallion saw the vibration of calm make its way to the equines head. The creature paused for a moment, then let its guard down. This was far easier than convincing the general, but even so, Dallion wasnt out of the woods yet.

Accept the draw, okay? he said, changing the calm to joy. Its the best for all of us.

The equines emotions oscillated. Just twice more and Dallion felt it would agree.

Were not here to clear this level. One more. And I really dont want to fight you.

Calm and joy vibrated in the creatures head and heart. All that was needed now was one final push, and Dallion felt that he could do it.

Draw?

Combat ended

The Equine has accepted a draw.

Chapter 133: Hidden Threat

It took a while for Vend and Dallion to reach the gate area to the next level. The entire time Vend didnt say a word, keeping an eye both on Dallion and the equine. It was obvious he didnt approve of the draw; it was more uncertainty than anger, although Dallion had still detected a modicum of fear.

While walking, Dallion noticed several other equines of three different colors observing them at a distance. There were a few points at which the situation was tense, but thankfully, none of them attacked.

Dont rely on draws too much, Vend whispered as the rest of the party came into view. And dont rely on creatures.

Can they break their word? Dallion asked out of curiosity.

People can. Why wouldnt others?

An interesting and rather dark question. The reaction of the rest of the group, though, made Dallion quickly forget it. The majority were impressed that they had managed to catch an equine so fast, and of course everyone gave the credit to Vend.

Dal! Falkner was the first to rush to him. What happened? How did you catch it?

Oh, Vend did most of the work, Dallion lied, not in the mood to go into details. Anything interesting happen here?

Nothing.

We were almost swarmed at one point, Bel said with casual annoyance. A few tried to have a go, but Spike scared them off.

Dallion hadnt heard anything of the sort. Then again, he was just a packrat as far as the guild was concerned. If it wasnt for the emergency, he never would have participated in something as large in scale as a twenty-level item.

Cut the chatter, Spike grumbled. Dal, pick up your load and join the rats. We only get a few minutes for this, so dont waste time.

Everyone rushed into position. Much to his regret, Dallion had to get a few dozen weapons and shields once more. Despite this small adventure, once a packrat always a packrat.

When everyone was ready, Vend started the gate opening ritual. Dallion was very much looking forward to seeing how a gate opening in such an item worked, so he deliberately kept his expectations low. To his surprise, the event not only matched, but surpassed them.

Vend's part was simple: taking a few crystal chunks from the ground, he arranged them in a circle, then took a step back. One by one the chunks glowed green, then yellow, and finally white. A second circle of light formed on the surrounding ground, then a third. Rays sprouted from the edges of the circle like trees splitting into branches the further up they went. A dozen feet into the air, the branches of light intertwined, creating a circle of glowing leaves in the air, as the stems of light disappeared beneath. At that point, the equine stepped in. Unforced, it made its way to the center of the crystal chunks and waited.

For a split second, Dallion thought that the creature looked at him and muttered thanks. Barely was the word registered when the equine burst into a firework of bright lights that punctured the ground beneath it like a drill. Moments later, the circles of leaves descended from the air, forming steps of light in the hole as it went down.

Get going! Spike shouted. Fighters first, rats behind.

The moment of fascination passed quickly as everyone rushed to take advantage of the stairs before they vanished.

The stairway continued down for a while. No sooner had they reached the lower level when they continued onto the one beneath that. In Dallion's mind he could already see the stairways as tumblers to a lock. A few were misaligned, but for the most part there were great large ones that went straight down connecting several levels. Of course, the initial exploration party probably didn't know that, nor did they know what they had to do to trigger the guardian fight to begin with.

Several times, Dallion felt like asking Bel a question, but each time he couldn't decide how to phrase it. That was one of the downsides of being among awakenedask something in a stairwell and everyone heard about it.

Bel, have you had guardians surrender? he finally decided on the direct approach.

Once or twice, the girl replied, not in the least bothered by the question.

Is that normal?

Definitely is. Guardians usually surrender when facing young children. You have to have really crappy luck not to get the first guardians to surrender. That's why parents pay the order to have their children go through their first awakening as young as possible. No better way to rack up a few levels early on.

As terrifying as that sounded, Dallion had to admire the thought process of the first person to find this life hack.

I was a bit older but went through the same. Not the best experience, and definitely confusing. Bel smiled, remembering her first awakening as if it had happened decades ago. It took me months to figure out how I had won when I had been losing so badly against the guardian.

What about afterwards? Any cases of surrender there?

You always hear talk about it happening, but I don't believe it. It's one of those myths like Arthur's copyettes. The things existed at one point, there's no denying that, but now they're all banished. Same is with guardians surrendering; it happens, but unless you're a child, don't count on it.

And still Dallion had seen it happen several times, in some cases he was the initiator.

The further down the party went, the more transparent everything around them became. The walls and columns were the first to lose their opacity, slowly turning into glass followed by the local flora. It was an unnerving experience, though nowhere as traumatic as what Nox was going through. The temporary calm that had occurred a few levels up now was completely gone, causing the crackling to hiss almost nonstop from its corner.

Things had gotten so bad that Dallion had asked the shield in a whisper if it could do anything about it. Sadly, there had been no response.

Will you feel better if you come out? Dallion whispered. The hissy mew suggested that was not the case. Try to grab a buckler and hide behind it.

The gesture was appreciated, and to Dallion's surprise, that was precisely what the cub did. One simply could only feel pity and concern upon seeing what the crackling was going through. At the same time, Dallion felt a bit uneasy, knowing how good Nox was at breaking things. Hopefully, the buckler in the awakened room was going to survive.

The tenth level came and went. Upon reaching the eleventh, the party found that there were already two other groups there. A few of the members Dallion recognized from the guild hall meeting, but for the most part he didn't know them so well. Upon asking how they had managed to get there so fast, Vend had suggested that it was most likely due to the small delay that the party had had on the first level. The explanation sounded logical, so no one bothered with further questions.

Okay, Vend began. The easy parts over. From here on the actual work begins. Most of you will remain on this floor where you'll keep searching for the group with the rest of the junior guild members. Meanwhile, I, and the experienced ones, will go to the next level to see if there isn't any trace of them there. Keep in mind that while a lot of this floor is cleared, there still might be a few creatures hiding here and there. At this level, each creature is as strong as your average guardian. Don't underestimate them.

Whispers filled the air. No one was particularly happy by the turn of events. Many had hoped that their leader would remain on the level with them. However, even more didn't want to go to the floor below, where the chances of serious mishap were greater.

As the groups were formed, it was hardly a surprise that Dallion was grouped with Bel, just as it was even less of a surprise that Falkner joined them as well on his own accord. This was the point at which the first big division occurred. All the groups went to the twelfth floor, while the weaker

members remained on the eleventh. Shortly after, Dallions group headed east, towards the end of the level.

I doubt theyve gone that way, Bel said with an annoying smirk.

I doubt theyre on this floor, Dallion said. Still, we have to start searching from somewhere and a wall is as good a place as any. Not to mention that it was furthest away from the source of Noxs anxiety.

You think theyre on the twelfth floor? Falkner asked.

No. I think theyre on the thirteenth. Dallion expected to hear some snarky remarks, but for some reason no one said anything, waiting for him to continue. Well, if you think about it, theres no reason for so many strong people to go down there while leaving the rest of us here. It would have been more efficient if the groups were divided in such a way as to cover both floors. The only reason I can think of for them leaving us here is that theyre going to try and clear the thirteenth floor.

But in that case, why take us along at all? It would have been simpler if only the veterans had gone.

Good point. And one to which Dallion had no adequate answer. I suspect there might be a chance that some of them are on this floor, after all. Since theres no point in wasting capable fighters here, we got the short straw.

I dont know. Bel scratched her ear. Sounds iffy to me.

Just as iffy as them leaving us here on our own.

Well, maybe

COMBAT INITIATED

Immediately, everyone drew their weapons. Even Dallion reached out to take his dartbow in anticipation of the worst.

Looking around, there was no reason for alarmthere wasnt a creature as far as the eye could see. Everything remained perfectly calm, and yet the red rectangle had appeared. If there was anything certain in this world, it was that the awakening markers and rectangles were absolute.

Anyone see anything? Dallion asked, looking in the distance in search of anything that could turn out to be a threat.

Nope, Bel replied, a pair of throwing knives in hand.

Nothing special, Falkner said. Maybe it was meant for another group?

Technically, it was possible, though Dallion doubted it. Something was out there to get them, he could feel it.

Nox, come out here, Dallion whispered. One part reluctant, two parts relieved to be near Dallion, the crackling emerged on his shoulder, claws carefully detracted so as not to shred Dallions thread armor. Sorry about this, buddy, but Ill need your help to find whats hunting us. You okay to give a hand?

Instead of an answer, the cub leapt off Dallions shoulder and dashed forward. Now the group had a direction to follow.

Chapter 134: Bloodlust

Dallion could feel the bloodlust directed towards him, yet failed to see any creature. It was as if an invisible presence was following him, keeping just out of sight, while determined to attack at the first given opportunity. By the looks of it, Nox was able to feel the presence as well. With a mixture of reluctance, loyalty, and determination, it continued forward on the verge of running. Based on Bel and Falkners reactions, Dallion got the distinct impression that none of them could see the crackling, although they too felt the invisible threat.

We should go back, Bel suggested. Get some more people to help.

That could make things worse. Dallion stopped his music skills. Even after getting used to them, his limit remained about five minutes until the headaches became overwhelming. Until he broke through his level cap, this was a limitation he had to deal with. Vend and the rest of the group leaders arent here, and the weaker ones will just risk getting hurt.

If we keep going, well get hurt and no one will ever know. Bel didnt say it, but she feared they might be the next ones to go missing.

As they went further, the outer wall of the level became visible. Transparent as everything else, it looked like a greyish murkiness that continued into infinity, as if the entire realm was surrounded by white mist.

Is that the wall? Dallion asked, as he went closer. Back on Earth he would have freaked out upon witnessing such a sitean entire reality floating in a nothingness of mist. Here, it seemed only slightly strange. Is there anything beyond?

The wall marks the outer limit of the item, Falkner said in a manner that suggested he was quoting something. During an awakened state, there is no contact between the inside of the realm and the real world. A layer of infinity ensures that nothing but an awakened can go from one to the other.

While the explanation sounded scientifically deep, there was one glancing loophole that became instantly obvious: the restrictions didnt apply to an awakened, but nowhere was it specified that the awakened had to be human.

Suddenly Dallion froze in his tracks.

Whats up? Bel asked.

We should get out of here, Dallion whispered. I know whats causing the disappearances.

That would be good news. The girl smiled. Right?

The unknown presence remained invisible. However, the bloodlust continued to be ever present around them. The chainling had used similar tactics.

As much as Dallion wanted that to be the case, though, he knew it couldn't be. Nox hadn't been nearly as terrified when in the presence of the shelfey.

There's nothing here, Falkner said once they reached the wall. Let's get back.

Just a moment. Dallion reached for his harpsword, only to realize it wasn't there. How could he have forgotten? After a moment of thought, he went for the second best—the dartbow. His entire focus was on Nox. The crackling cautiously made its way to a specific spot on the wall, then mewed twice.

If the layer of infinity is breached, can something come in from the outside? he asked Falkner.

In theory. The question made Falkner tense up as well. It'll be impossible to do at the guild, though. Special items are kept locked and there's almost always someone going in or out.

Almost always? Dallion didn't like the sound of that.

Well, there's no one in when they are brought in, or when they are stored. Not every item can be explored right away.

You know a lot about guild practices, Bel noted.

My family does business with a few back home. I picked up a few things.

So, something can have entered and remained hidden before the exploration started.

Yeah. Again, this is highly theoretical. It would be extremely

Nox hissed, his hair on edge. The crack in the wall widened with a loud sound as a multitude of black strands, each the size of a hair, streamed through into the level.

Dallion reacted before he could think, leaping forward. Using the armadil shield to cover as much of himself as possible, he grabbed Nox and continued running. No sooner had he done so than a series of thorn-like strands hit the ground, drilling holes through the crystal surface.

Get away! Dallion shouted, rolling over. Immediately after, he reached for his holster to redraw the weapon he had dropped while saving his familiar.

Species: Chainling Cub

Class: Crippled Star

Statistics: Unknown

Skills: Unknown

Weak spots: Unknown

The strands were still in the process of forming a creature, but he already knew what it would be. The only glimmer of hope he had was that the chainling was young enough for them to be able to defeat it.

Chainling! he shouted, targeting the dark silhouette as it was forming, then squeezed the trigger. A bolt split the air, only to be enveloped by black tendrils feet away from its target.

Dallion could say without question that a great many things had changed since he had last faced a chainling. Back then, he was barely a level four with a single weapon. Now he was close to double digits, all his stats were vastly improved, he had proper gear, not to mention he had been studying and training hundreds of attack and defense sequences. Yet one look at the misshapen monstrosity and all his accumulated knowledge seemed to vanish.

Falkner seemed no different. Normally eager to show his dominance, the boy was retreating, holding a weapon in each hand. Only Bel remained where she was, mostly because she was confused about what was going on.

Get Vend! Dallion shot another bolt. This one managed to graze the silhouette of the chainling, though without dealing any damage. No doubt about it, the creature was the same he had seen, but also different. For one, it was far smaller no larger than an ordinary dog but what it lacked in size, it made up for with aggression. Its bloodlust was so strong that Dallion didn't have to resort to his music skills to feel it.

Was there anything he could do at this point? Standing to his feet, Dallion drew the only melee weapon he had and went into a combined melee and ranged stance. Focusing his fears away, the logic part of his brain began functioning, telling him to stand his ground. With his weapons and equipment, he was far better off relying on a counterattack than rushing at it as he had last time. All that Dallion needed was something to provoke the chainling in making the first move. This time, it was Nox that provided that.

Still terrified beyond words, the crackling had somehow managed to transform that fear into its strength. Charging at the chainling, Nox leapt from spot to spot, avoiding any tendril attack the enemy creature threw at him. That was not all. As the crackling ran, Dallion could swear he could see the ground to crack beneath the cat's paws.

Two sets of claws slashed at each other. It was crackling against chainling, each young and unwilling to back off. And it was precisely at that point that Dallion shot his next bolt.

Havoc had told him to aim in the area of the neck the supposed weak spot of the chainling. During the hunt Dallion had failed to hit the target the chainling had proved to be too strong. This one, though, proved to be less agile.

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt Damage increased by 200%

The red rectangle wasn't only an indication that he had found the chainling's weakness, it meant that this chainling could be hit, and that changed everything. Now it no longer was a fight against an invincible enemy, but a numbers game. And when it came to a numbers game, Dallion had a slight advantage.

Aim for the spot just above its chest! He shouted. Nox, back!

Hearing the order, the crackling did one final slash at its enemy before rushing back towards Dallion. In its enraged state, the chainling followed. Knives and bolts flew to greet it. Most were deflected through the tendrils that came from the black silhouettes form, but one managed to hit, even if only caused a minor wound.

Was this self-loathing? No There was something different, something that Dallion couldn't quite see.

Dal, look out! Bel shouted.

Green markers appeared, though too slow to save Dallion's shoulder from being hit.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has decreased by 5%

Caught off guard, Dallion pulled back. The pain in his right shoulder intensified for a second before disappearing altogether. Even he had to admit that this was a huge advantage as opposed to the real world. Still, it didn't give him the time to remain idle.

Grabbing the tendril, Dallion shot two more bolts at the chainling in rapid succession. Both hit, dealing minor damage, but causing enough pain for the chainling to pull back its tendrils into its body.

Falkner, we can use your help on this! Dallion shouted. Falkner! He glanced over his shoulder.

The boy was petrified. For some reason he was reacting as if he had seen a creature of this sort before. No he was reacting as he had fought one.

Snap out of it! Dallion yelled. It's just a cub! It won't hurt you if we attack it all at once.

Not waiting for an answer, Dallion aimed at the chainling. The creature disappeared. A burst of questions appeared in Dallion's mind, but above anything else, his training kicked in. The lessons he had been forced to memorize by Nil, the set sequences of actions that he had trained time and time again until he could perform them at the drop of a hat, now came into use.

When faced with a disappearing enemy, nine out of ten times the best course of action was to perform an immediate guard-withdraw. Without hesitation Dallion jumped back, extending the

armadil shield before him. A split second later, he felt a heavy force push against the shields surface, shoving him several steps back.

Red and green markers appeared, but he wasn't looking at them, performing the correct steps and spins to get into a position for a strike without having to see his enemy. Then Dallion moved his shield. The chainling was there, fangs bared, instants away from commencing an attack of its own. Ultimately, it was Dallion who proved to be faster.

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt Damage increased by 200%

Chapter 135: Chainling Faceoff

MINOR WOUND

Your health has decreased by 5%

Dallion winced as one of the paws stretching from the chainlings body slashed his right side. Unable to attack him through direct means, the creature had resolved to launching strands and appendages from its body. Most of the attacks were easy to evade, but now and again some would hit, chipping away at Dallions health. For the first time Dallion saw what the guardians facing him must have felt. Now that the roles had become reversed, fighting off a stubborn opponent refusing to die became increasingly annoying.

Keep attacking! Dallion shouted. Ill be the bait!

Having the other guildmates help would have been a huge plus, although he still could only rely on one of them. Falkner, who had the most skills of everyone present, still refused to get involved; he kept his distance from the chainling. At least Bel had joined in actively, throwing knives at a distance. The way she was able to keep bombarding the creature with knives while only possessing half a dozen was extremely impressive, not to mention raised a few questions. According to what Nil had told Dallion, one had to enter double digit territory in order to summon weapons directly in their hands. Technically, it was possible that Bel had increased her level to double digits since they met. However, she definitely wasn't back during the selection trial and was still able to pull it off, or so Dallion remembered.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has decreased by 5%

Another strand pierced through Dallions leg, reducing his health to two-thirds. This time, though, he took advantage and managed to land a shot in the creatures torso. The damage didn't seem too high.

Thanks, Nil. All your training paid off.

Dallion smiled.

Falkner, get your head in the game! Bel shouted.

Maybe it was the high pitch of her voice, or the fact that the chainlings movements were getting slower, but the boy came out of his mental paralysis. Taking a step back, he looked at the situation, absorbing everything that had happened in the last minutes. Then, after another moment of hesitation, he darted forward.

Falkners attack method was vastly different from the other two. While Bel and Dallion relied on ranged attacks, the boy resorted to melee. Reaching out, he summoned his weaponone that Dallion hadnt seen him wield beforea polearm.

New marker patterns emerged. Starting from the weapon, they stretched towards the chainling in the form of a prolonged cone. The strange thing was that the cone was hollow inside.

When he saw the attack trajectory, Dallion jumped back. Even if they were on the same side, he doubted that things like friendly fire were ignored in normal combat. Instants later he was proven right.

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt Damage increased by 200%

MINOR WOUND

Your health has decreased by 5%

Two red rectangles appeared in the air. One was the result of Falkners attack on the chainling, the otherthe result of Dallion not being able to move away fast enough.

You take close combat! Dallion instructed. Well support you with ranged. Okay?

Falkner attacked again in response, causing two new red rectangles to appear. This time, all the damage was done to the enemy.

Can anyone see its health? Dallion asked, even if he suspected what the answer would be.

It should be zero by now, Bel replied.

So much for helpful comments.

Do you have any idea, Nox? he whispered.

The crackling didnt respond. The ongoing fight kept it on edge. Faced with a great unknown, Dallion decided to take a gamble and do one thing he was getting progressively better at.

Bel, cover me! he shouted, hoping she would understand the reference.

Letting go of his blade and dartbow, Dallion reached for his lyre. He then took a deep breath and focused on the emotions streaming from the chainling.

The more Dallion focused, the more the chainling looked like a black hole at least the one described in YouTube videos. A giant emotionless void surrounded the creature, enveloping it completely. Bloodlust streamed from the edge of the void, radiating everywhere about. That had to be the reason why Dallion had felt the bloodlust long before seeing the creature. Given that Nox had started acting funny from the second level on, there had to be a lot of bloodlust involved.

However, things didnt end there. There was an incredibly faint trace of further emotions trying to crack through the void. It wasnt the first time Dallion had felt them, but this was the most pronounced. Apparently, they appeared whenever the chainling received damage, only to dissipate soon after.

It was easy to match the strings that resonated in a similar fashion. However, when he pulled them, there was no sound. Confused, Dallion tried again. He could see the string vibrate, but still heard nothing. No marker appeared, not any other indication he had succeeded or failed. It was as if the bloodlust couldnt be copied.

Watch out! Bel shouted, just in time for Dallion to evade the black strands heading his way. Almost simultaneously Falkner did a piercing attack aimed at the chainlings weak spot. Sadly, the strike missed its mark. With a twist, the creature managed to move away just enough so that the tip of the polearm hit its side. The damage was negligible, although it managed to cause an eruption of emotions for Dallion to see.

Fear, hate, hope that was a strange combination of emotions to have. Even so, Dallion grasped the opportunity, focusing on the easiest. Still in the air, his fingers pulled the lyres strings. This time there was a reaction. The blue marker indicators emerged, starting their movement along the strings to its extremities. Waiting for precisely the right moment, Dallion played the strings again. Alas, as the sound was made, the void smothered everything, making the chainling impervious again.

Falkner, land a critical hit! Dallion shouted.

Thats what Ive been trying to do. For once the boy had lost its cool. Its not that easy!

Im not asking if its easy. I need you to do it so I can try something. Dallion glanced at Bel, then back at the creature. Bel, you try as well! I only need one hit from you two. After that After that there was no telling what would happen.

In a best-case scenario, Dallion would be able to keep the creature frozen for a few seconds, which would be enough for his guildmates to finish it off. However, there was always the fear that the music could somehow force the chainling in its second form. There was no evidence that such a form even existed, but after all the games Dallion had played he had his fears.

Aim for the eyes! He shouted.

The instruction brought some confusion to Bel and Falkner, but more importantly it confused the chainling more. For a fraction of a second the creature paused, adjusting its stance to protect its eyes. That proved to be fatal. Two aim markers emerged on its chest. The attacks were done simultaneously, but it was Falkners tip that hit the spot.

CRITICAL HIT

Dealt Damage increased by 200%

Emotions more powerful than anything Dallion had seen so far streamed out of the void. Clearer than before, it was now obvious that they were aimed at the chainling itself. Both the fear and anger were directed at the creature itself, while the hope was directed towards Dallion?

Whatever you did got it mad! Falkner jumped away.

Bel threw half a dozen knives at the beast. All of them hit the torso, yet the one aimed at the weak spot missed its mark. Right now, though, that wasnt the most important. Matching the timing, Dallion played another chord.

As before, the emotions intensified. The void surrounding the chainling had fractured, allowing a peak to what was inside. Shapes of blue hue emerged a heart, a brain and they didnt belong to the chainling. Or rather, they didnt belong to the chainling in its present form. Dallion had only had his music skills for a short period of time, but there was one thing he could recognize instantly: the shape of emotions belonging to a human.

Stop attacking! he shouted, playing the next chord. Keep your distance but dont attack!

Are you crazy?! Falkner shouted. These things heal! If we dont kill it now, well

Well be killing a person!

The words tasted bitter as Dallion spoke them. The concept was enough to make him sick. The creature they had been fighting, the ferocious chainling that was the source of chaos and destruction in this world, hadnt killed the missing guild members it was one of them. There could be no

mistake. They must have come across something that had transformed them into monsters, just like had happened to the shelfeys. From that perspective, chainlings weren't actual creatures, they were more like parasites that found a host and transformed it to something that suited their needs. That explained their awakened power and intelligence. It also meant that back in Dherma village, the hunt had involved chasing a human.

Was it possible for that to be true? Such an important detail would have been shared by someone. At the very least, Havoc would have said something. The large man had claimed to have hunted chainlings before. Could it be that he was aware but had chosen to keep it a secret? Even if so, why had everyone else remained quiet?

Dallion, what are you doing? Bel asked. We must finish this.

No one could say that the creature Dallion had helped hunt was human or ever had been. Maybe it had become twisted to the degree that there was no way to bring it back to humanity. Even if that were the case, Dallion had no intention of letting this happen here. The opponent he was fighting, as lethal as they were, was clearly a person and if there was a chance they could be saved, Dallion was going to take it.

The next chord filled the air.

Chapter 136: Ray of Loyalty

Watching a person fight to escape the effects of a chainling was like watching someone try to break a really large balloon from the inside without having anything sharp at hand. Each chord Dallion played made an area of the creature's silhouette thinner, though still not enough for its prisoner to be released.

Dal. Bel approached. She was still holding a pair of knives in each hand, ready to throw them at the slightest provocation. You're bleeding.

That wasn't what Dallion wanted to hear, but he knew he couldn't look down. Doing so would lose his concentration, and if that happened there was no telling if he could start using his music skill again.

The pressure on his temples felt as if Dallion had put his head in a press. At this rate, he could barely manage five seconds more. With luck, maybe he could stretch it to seven. Either way, it wouldn't be enough.

There was one easy way to resolve this. Dallion could just tell Bel and Falkner to attack. In its weakened state the chainling wasn't going to survive, likely it wouldn't even be able to evade the attacks. The person trapped inside would die, but ultimately, one death was better than many wasn't it?

Dallion gritted his teeth. Back on Earth, when he wasted his time scrolling through memes on the internet, he had come across an old demotivation picture. The caption had said that failure is when your best isn't good enough. Right now, that was a valid description of his state. Quitting was the logical choice, but that didn't change the fact that Dallion remained greedy.

Nox, Dallion whispered. This one's yours.

There was no hesitation on the familiars part. In one instant it was on Dallion's shoulder, the next the crackling was already rushing towards the enemy. As long as it could make a deep enough scar, everything should be over with.

Match the timing, Dallion said. All Nox had to do was match the timing

Three seconds at most remained until Dallion had reached his limit three chances for Nox to slice the chainling's silhouette open. The cat got to its enemy without issue. The Chainling was too busy trying to keep itself whole from bothering to attack others. Extending his claws, Nox waited.

When Dallion played the next chord, Nox struck. That proved to be all that was needed. A thin line of white appeared on the chainling's form like a rip in a plastic bag. In that single moment the beast knew that it was done for, and yet still refused to accept it. Tendrils emerged from both sides of it, desperately trying to sew the tear together. However, the more the creature tried, the bigger the tear became. The unraveling continued for several seconds, all the time Dallion didn't dare stop playing out of fear that doing so might cause the chainling to recover.

Suddenly, there was a loud pop. After that, the creature had vanished from sight.

RAY OF LOYALTY

Fighting for your convictions is a noble quality. If you're not strong enough, however, there's always the danger that it will lead you astray.

Finally, Dallion relaxed his hand. The pain was killing him, but he refused to go drop to the ground. He could feel the changes brought to by the achievement this body felt sturdier. No doubt he had gained a few points. The next time he returned to his awakening room, he was going to see which exactly.

You okay? Falkner asked. Before Dallion could answer, he reached out into the air and summoned a small silver flask. take a sip. He offered it.

Dallion was too exhausted to argue or even think. Grabbing the flask, he removed the cap, then took a large gulp. A warm sensation filled him; unlike anything he'd felt before. It was almost as if he were drinking sunshine. The liquid filled his mouth, felt as if it was going up his throat and into his head. The sensation was indescribable, but at the same time pleasant.

That's enough. Falkner pulled the flask away. Give it a few moments.

What was it? Dallion managed to ask. There was no response.

That's the first time I see a creature pop like that, Bel said, as she put her knives away. What was it? A chainling cub, Falkner said in awe. It's unbelievable we managed to pull this off! It was a cub, but still

Yeah, yeah. Dallion forced a smile onto his face.

It was largely thanks to Nox that they had managed to achieve this, yet again. This was twice that the crackling had helped him in battle, not to mention it was the sole reason Dallion had managed to unseal his mother's powers. There were no two ways about it. If Nox hadn't joined him when he did, things would have been very different.

Now we can call the others, Dallion said. There might be more of them.

More chainlings?

They're the reason that the people became lost. In fact, they were never lost, they were swallowed up or something. Hopefully, we managed to free one of them, and Dallion paused. Did the creature's vanishing mean that the person had been healed in the real world? Anything was possible, but while they were here, it was difficult to find out. Let's continue along the wall.

You think there are more of them? Falkner's voice trembled.

More than one person vanished, Dallion said, although judging by Nox, the danger was over. The crackling not only had stopped fretting, but had actually curled up in Dallion's awakening room and snoozed off. Even so, Dallion didn't want to take any chances.

The party continued along the wall for over several hours. At one point they came across another group that had a similar idea. Some news was exchanged telling each of the parties something new.

Dallion's group had shared their experience with the chainling, as well as the crack in the outer wall. In return, they had learned of a serious battle taking place on the thirteenth floor. Apparently, Dallion had been right. Vend and the rest of the fighters had gone there to fight. Not only that, but they had managed to make their way to the guardian arena, and summon the entity.

It was a good strategy. Clear the floor, so everything is lit up, and then continue with the search. Dallion was curious whether something else hadn't happened there as well. Considering the skill of a guild elite, anything was possible.

After the conversation was over, each of the groups continued along its path. Another hour and Dallion was convinced that they wouldn't find anything else interesting on the floor. Even so, he pressed on. Bel, who wasn't as nearly stubborn as him, had tried to convince them to go to the levels below in search of Vend. The idea wasn't the worst, and Dallion would have agreed if the elite hadn't found them first. The frown on his face instantly created a tense atmosphere, making Dallion almost wish they had found another chainling cub instead.

Whose idea was it? Vend asked.

Mine, I think, Dallion was quick to reply.

The elite gave him a stern look, then shook his head.

Come on, he said after a while. Mission is over. The lost have been found.

Really? Bel asked, the only person who had any enthusiasm left in her. All of them?

All. I would have told you earlier, but you and another two groups decided to go searching too well.

That's on me as well. While Dallion suspected that wouldn't endear him to anyone, he couldn't let the others take the blame, especially after all the help they'd been against the chainling. I wasn't sure there was

Vend make a sign for him to stop.

We'll talk more back in the guild. Right now, we must leave and let the others work.

Without arguments, the trio followed Vend to the guardian area of the level, then without warning found themselves back in the large room of the guildhall. All the other groups were there as well, letting go of the artefact at precisely the same time. That was one of the weird effects that Dallion hadn't gotten used to; it didn't matter when a person left an awakened realm minutes, days, or even months earlier than someone else. As long as they had entered at the same time, all returned to the real world at precisely the same moment.

Dozens of people let go of their group leaders, almost in sync. The more anxious ones hurried out of the room to get their payment and some well-deserved food. Dallion, though, remained.

Good job, Dal! Arthurows gave him a pat on the shoulder. Heard you did some pretty impressive work.

Yeah. While he knew that he had, Dallion was not in the mood for cheer. He felt that he had disappointed Vend several times during this job and now wasn't sure how to feel about it all. Had a lot of help.

Always better to get the help than be the one helping, the other laughed. So, we're going down for some grub?

Yeah, sure Dallion looked around. You go ahead, I'll join in a bit.

With a shrug, Arthurows left the room, knowing not to ask further questions. By the looks of it, Bel and Falkner had as well. Soon the only people remaining were Vend and Dallion.

You realize, don't you? Vend broke the silence.

Dallion nodded.

No one must learn of this.

A spark of hope appeared in Dallion's mind. Up till now he had assumed the worse, not once considering the obvious.

If anyone asks, you faced a creature you hadn't seen before and can't remember its name.

Got you, Dallion replied in relief. Are the lost okay?

Yeah. They were fine the moment we dealt with the creatures. Lucky you had music skills. If you had killed it outright, we'd have had one less guild member.

The thought was chilling, though not as chilling as the prospect of getting captured by a chainling.

How were they captured? Dallion asked. I thought that chainlings only roam the wilderness.

They do, but that's the thing about spheric items. They are part of the wilderness. No one is certain when they were created or by whom. Some scholars claim they are older than reality itself. That's a stretch, but you've seen how different they are compared to anything else. Some of them have creatures that don't exist anywhere else. The copyettes, the nymphs, and the crippled spawn. The last was said in a whisper. That's why we get paid so much to clear the exotic items. This thing might well be a fancy dresser, but that's not the point. People pay us to make sure that it's safe when they take it back. No surprises, no unpleasanties. And lately demand has been booming.

The chainlings in the wilderness, Dallion began. Are they human?

What makes you ask that?

Are they?

That's a difficult one to answer. Some claim they are, others say they aren't. The truth is, we'll never know for certain. One thing we do know, is that even if they prove to have been human at some point, there's no helping the person escape. Awakened skills can be used in the real world, but they don't have nearly the same effect. If your battle had taken place here, you or the chainling would have died. There is no other option.

That was a grim thought, and it definitely didn't make Dallion feel better. The chainling that he had helped hunt down had it been someone? Or was it just a monster set to roam and cause destruction?

And the Crippled Star? How is it inv

Dal, you did well today, Vend interrupted him. You saved your guild members and eliminated a danger. That's all that matters. Leave it at that. Some questions are best left unanswered.

Chapter 137: Doubt and Gear

The celebratory feast was of epic proportions. It was the guildmaster's rule that after a mission of major significance, including rescuing guild members, the entire guild would transform into a giant party house of sorts. Every guild member was invited to join the feast, regardless if they participated in the mission or not; only those that did would get paid, though.

Sitting in the quietest spot he could find, Dallion stirred what was left of his drink with a fork.

Dallion stirred for a bit more, then put the fork on the empty plate that was on the ground next to him. Still, he didn't finish the drink, looking at the swirling crimson liquid inside. Grunt had smuggled a bottle of what looked like wine, a rather expensive one at that, judging by the way he did so from the inside of the guildhall and given it to Dallion. The flavor was quite nice, but Dallion didn't feel like drinking. If it weren't for the cravings of his stomach, he probably wouldn't have eaten either.

You're still thinking about the chainlings, aren't you?

I was part of a hunt, Dallion mumbled. It was thanks to that hunt that hed received the dartbowthe weapon without which he wouldnt ever have reached the city. Was it worth it, though? Maybe it would have been better if he had remained in Dherma. The village chief would have probably passed in a decade. If Dallion had endured, maybe things would have gotten better?

No, that wasnt it either. If he had done nothing, Veil would have taken over and without the experience of the hunt, he likely would have become rotten to the core. Objectively things had changed for the better, and that only made the whole situation more difficult to accept.

Did you face any chainlings?

That was after my time. There were a lot of other nasty creatures, though. The story is always the same. Sometimes you can help them, some are beyond salvation. Then again, they say that the Seven Moons can save anyone.

The Seven Moons. Maybe Dallion could ask more on the topic of the Crippled Star when he went to their shrine. Thanks to the mission, Dallion had earned enough to pay for his awakening attempt. Officially he was supposed to earn two golds, like everyone else. Because of his actions, though, Vend had shared they would be paying him double. Of course, the request was that he didnt share the information too much.

All I can say is that this is one of those moments. You have a choice to make. Can you put up with it or not? Personally, I think it would be a waste if you gave up, although its an option. There are a lot of places that would like to hire an awakened. From what I saw, even working at a tavern pays well. Or you can marry into wealth. A lot of rich people are okay with marrying their daughters to awakened. Its said that it increases the chances of your children becoming awakened as well.

Does it? Dallion couldnt help but ask.

So, genetics arent what you said they are, Dallion whispered, thinking about the conversations with his grandfather. Or maybe it was only valid for people who came from Earth.

Whats that?

Nothing. I was thinking out loud. Dallion took a sip from his mug. In your time, was there something called soul loss? Or soul confusion?

Hmm. Cant say its familiar. A few terms have changed. Honestly, Im lucky that the language is still the same. Why? Is it something thats bothering you?

No, its nothing important. Apparently, Nil was the one to ask. Right now, though, Dallion didnt feel like it. All he wanted to do was get his money and return to the tavern. Thanks, Dian. He put his cup on the ground, then stood up.

You're very welcome. That's what I'm for. Also, don't hesitate to come visit when you feel like it. As the saying goes, guardians don't sleep.

Sure. There was no chance of that happening.

Quietly, Dallion sneaked into the street. Most of the guild members were too busy celebrating to notice, or if they did, they didn't care. As far as they were concerned, Dallion was just another participant in the rescue operation. Given what had happened, it was better this way.

Looking at the sky, it was still morning, although in Dallion's mind it felt as if weeks had passed. It wasn't only the time difference that made him feel this way, it was the atmosphere. All the time he had spent walking through the sphere items levels had made him so accustomed to the awakened realm, that Nerosal seemed foreign.

Just tired, Dallion lied. I'll get some sleep and it'll be okay.

That better be real sleep. Awakened sleep might not be the best idea right now.

The Gremlins Timepiece was almost empty when Dallion walked in. The moment she saw him, Hannah knew that something hadn't gone well. Dallion could tell she was about to say something, so he decided not to give her the chance.

Hey, Hannah, he said preemptively. I'll go have a talk with the harpsisword. If memory served, the last conversation they had was about him neglecting his weapons. I'll be down for the lunch crowd.

There was a moment of hesitation on the woman's side. She could tell he was coming up with excuses to avoid the real issue, yet at the same time she didn't want to openly ask him about it either. In the end, she just nodded and watched him head for the stairs.

She's dealt with worse, Dallion replied without thinking. She'll have forgotten it by lunch.

People don't forget things. They just pretend they have.

Entering the room, Dallion took off his shield, then threw his pouch on the bed. Four gold coins were inside. For the moment he didn't care, though.

Normally this was the point at which he would flop on the bed and get a few hours of sleep. However, he didn't feel tired enough to sleep right now. Instead, he sat on the bed and stared at the floor for a few seconds.

Thoughts went through his mind, opposing each other in pairs, until one rather peculiar one popped up. From everything Dallion knew so far, music skills had the power to affect creatures and objects alike. If so, was it possible for them to affect him as well?

Without a word, Dallion took the harpsisword from beneath the bed. He then removed the fabric around it and held it as he did in the awakened realms. Taking a deep breath, he then played a chord.

There was no way for Dallion to see what emotions passed through him, but he knew one emotion to be lacking joy.

The chord turned to two, then three, then four. Unlike in the awakened world, there wasn't even a hint of headaches. In contrast the pain on the tips of his fingers was quite noticeable. It was as if he were learning to play a guitar all over again. To Dallion's surprise, the music that came from the weapon was just as good as if he were using a musical instrument. Furthermore, it seemed to have the effect he wanted it to have.

Thinking about it, music also made him feel better back on Earth. Maybe there was something about music triggering emotions and he just couldn't see it.

You've become mercantile all of a sudden. Dallion allowed himself a slight smile.

Just egoistic. The more money you have, the longer you'll be able to rent me.

Who says I'll keep renting you? Maybe I'll win you outright.

That would be great, but we both know you won't. Clearing that cane won't be an easy task. Besides, you wouldn't want a companion shield once you get a feel of the real thing.

What's that supposed to mean?

I'm defensive. Not all shields are. The battle shields have the means to attack just as well as defend. They are far more practical for someone who wants to level up fast.

I was told that only a weak person complains about his gear, Dallion recited one of Nils words of wisdom.

She usually is. In what way, though?

You've been neglecting your sword, and women don't like being neglected.

Women? Dallion missed his final chord. All this time he had assumed the sword to have a male guardian mostly because he considered it a reflection of himself. However, there was nothing that guaranteed it.

You can tell?

When I said I'd been having conversations with the rest of the general's collection, what did you think I meant? We can talk to each other just as we can see each other. Maybe you'll learn more about that one day, but for now trust me. Your harpsisword is a she.

Is she another dryad?

I think you should ask her that yourself.

Dallion could hear the shields smirk in his voice. Then again, he had a point. Talking about someone standing there was considered rude when it came to people; should it be any different when it came to items?

Sorry, Dallion whispered.

Item Awakening

The realm was very different from what Dallion expected. It wasn't in the usual grey as the other weapons he'd been in, it wasn't closed either. He found himself on the balcony of a golden tower overseeing a beautiful sunset over the sea. Even the water was a warm golden orange, as was part of the sky.

You are in a vast golden domain.

Defeat the guardian to change the HARPSISWORDS destiny.

There was little chance of that.

Hello? Dallion shouted, his voice echoing throughout the realm. Hello, where are you? he asked again.

A golden staircase extended outside the tower, continuing to the top. Clearly that was the only place to go. Passing his hand through his hair, Dallion started the climb.

The higher up he went, a larger part of the world became visible. As it turned out, the tower was on a small island in the middle of an endless sea. Golden trees surrounded the base of the tower, some of their branches reaching up to the top of the tower itself.

Are you up there? Dallion continued climbing.

Looking below, he could tell that he had passed over a hundred steps, but even so he didn't feel tired in any single way. If anything, he felt light as air, and the smell of the faint ocean breeze created a sense of exotic familiarity. Maybe he should have taken the bottle of wine from the guild celebration to enjoy here.

Harpsisword? Dallion was a few steps from the top of the tower now. From this distance he could tell it was forming one giant terrace. Sorry about taking so long to come here. My bad entirely. I really he froze still, barely able to believe his eyes.

HARPSISWORD GUARDIAN

Species: Nymph

Class: Shadow

Statistics: 100% Health

Skills:

- **Wind slash**

- **Emotion slash**

- **Sound entangle**

Weak spots: none

Chapter 138: The Harpsisword

Back on Earth there were hundreds of descriptions of nymphs, from the Greek interpretations to modern artists. Given the creature that stood before Dallion, none of the art did her justice. Slender almost to the extreme, the nymph had an ethereal quality to her, as if she were completely surrounded by water. Long golden hair flowed down from her head, up to floor as she sat next to a large harp. As for her clothes, it was as if she were wearing a garment made of a single sheet of water folded in such a way as to create a robe.

Seeing Dallion, the nymph smiled. Sapphire blue eyes sparkled on her face, making Dallion want to turn away but unable to.

Hello? he managed to say. Im Dallion

The nymph nodded, then gestured for him to move closer.

Nice harp, Dallion said. It was at that point that he actually noticed the harps strings were made of water. The sudden twist made him feel somewhat more at ease, making him wonder what would a string of water sound like. Possibly this was the representation of the harpsiswords strings on the outside?

Based on what he had read in the ring library, it was more likely that the entire tower was the representation of the weapon. The harp had to be something that the guardian had made for herself.

Were not going to fight, right? Dallion asked as he reached a few steps from her. I mean, I dont think I can improve your tower he looked down at the floor of the golden terrace at all, if Im honest.

The nymph chuckled voicelessly, almost as if something was blocking her voice.

Cant you talk? Dallion asked, then felt like biting his tongue. That was a stupid question. To his surprise, the nymph shook her head. Oh.

That was something he didnt know about nymphs. Not that Dallion had spent a lot of time reading Greek myths back on Earth, but he would have remembered something so key.

Are all nymphs like that? He decided to check.

The guardian shook his head.

The nymph shook her head again. Her fingers slid along the strings of the harp. At first, Dallion thought she was playing a tune to change the mood, but after a while he started to notice that the melody was in fact a series of sounds which combined into words. It was an unparalleled experience. The closest thing Dallion could compare it to was a puzzle in which the pieces were made of sound and had to be arranged in real time so one could get an idea of the overall picture.

Theres nothing physically wrong, the melody said. Im just not allowed to.

That was new. Most likely a result of a limitation someone had put on the weapon.

Im glad to finally meet you, the melody composed a new sentence.

Im glad as well. Dallion felt slightly guilty. The first thing he should have done was to talk to the harpsiswords guardian. Given how much the weapon had helped him, it was the least he could do. It

wouldnt be a bad idea if he checked on the guardians of the rest of his gear as well. The dartbow was one more such example. Hed had the weapon for some time and didnt even bother to go into its realm.

I hope youll use me in battle. The nymph played on her harp.

Im already using you in battle, Dallion said. Well, lately Ive been a packrat, but when I go to pass my awakening trial, Ill bring you as well. Promise.

No. The nymph shook her head. Real battle, her melody said.

Real battles? Dallion paused. Battles in the real world?

The nymph nodded.

No doubt about it, she definitely wasnt a companion weapon. Despite her appearance, Dallion could sense she had seen a lot of battles, and possibly more slaughters than he could possibly imagine. Just because she had such a lovely and innocent appearance didnt mean she was harmless. After all, she remained a lethal weapon designed to influence the emotions of enemies while hacking them to bits.

Im sure I will, Dallion said, although he wished he didnt have to. Can you tell me anything about your past?

The nymph tilted her head, looking at him with hesitation.

Your past owners, I meant. Dallion corrected himself. The time he had spent with the shield had made him forget that the vast majority of beings werent nearly as chatty. Im curious who your previous owners were.

Instead of an answer, the nymph looked away. That clearly wasnt a subject she wished to discuss.

Can I know your name, at least?

Asterias, a new melody replied.

It was a strange name, very Greek, and not at all what Dallion would have expected her to have. His limited knowledge of words told him that Astra was related to a star. Maybe the nymphs name was starry?

Asterias, he repeated slowly. I like it. It definitely sounded exotic. Any last name?

The nymph just looked at him.

After close to a minute of thinking, a switch in Dallion flicked. He suddenly saw that there was no need to talk about anything. He could just take a seat on the terrace and do nothing. His reaction was probably the right one, for the moment he did so, the nymph started playing. This time it wasn't a combination of sounds to form a sentence, but an actual musical melody.

Within moments, Dallion felt how much stress he had been subjecting himself to. He could almost feel them crumble off his skin like blocks of plaster, allowing him to breathe. Had he always been like this? All this time he thought that he'd been keeping a good schedule. Following Nils' advice, he had cut down to training to acceptable levels, and was certain to get lots of sleep even if in the awakened realm and food. Apparently, he had never noticed all the pressure gradually building up.

Thank you, Dallion whispered, closing his eyes. For the first time since he was a child, did he feel absolute calm and freedom. It was almost guaranteed that these emotions were put in him by the melody, but he didn't care. At least for a moment he could allow himself to enjoy this.

Once the moment was gone, Dallion opened his eyes again. He was on the floor of the terrace, covered with a blanket of water. Slowly, he pulled it off. His senses told him it was water, just as they assured him it was fabric.

Asterias? Dallion looked around. The nymph was there, seated in the opposite corner of the terrace. Upon hearing him, she turned around. Was I asleep for long?

The nymph nodded.

Sorry about that. He got to his feet. I think I've been overdoing it a bit. He felt quite refreshed now, though. Well, I think I better get going. It won't be a bad idea to get some real world rest. And clean my room a bit. The innkeeper I'm with is really strict about that.

Smile on face, the nymph nodded once more, then waved.

I promise I'll be back, though. Dallion left the harpsichord. As expected, the next instant he was back in his room in the inn.

I was there long enough. Dallion carefully wrapped the sword in the piece of cloth he had, then put her on the floor. First thing this afternoon he was going to buy a proper stand, and not only for the harpsichord, but for the shield and all the other important items as well. Dian, have I been treating you well?

Dallion didn't respond.

You're thinking of passing the trial, aren't you?

After the lunch shifts over. I have the money, so why wait? I have to get there sooner or later, so I choose sooner.

Some things mustnt be rushed. You can still do it tomorrow morning. Spend a day to think about things. Come in here and we can have a nice long talk about it. Or if you prefer, we can have the talk like we are now.

Is there any reason I shouldnt?

Theres always at least one, just as theres a reason you should go now. I only want to be sure that youre sure. Money aside, it wont be an easy experience. The gates of development are there for a reason, and each one changes you.

In what way?

I cant tell you that, and once you become a double digit, youll learn why. Meanwhile, what did you think of Asterias?

You know her?

I havent met her before, if thats what youre asking. But yes, I do know her. As Ive said, weve spoken a bit. Its difficult not to while youre sleeping. Shes an old soul. A bit scary, though. I wouldnt want to meet her on the battlefield, thats for certain.

The age-old question: what would happen if an all-cutting sword hit an invincible shield? In this case, the harpsisword and the armadil shield were neither, but having them clash in combat raised interesting questions.

She seemed rather nice.

Please, I dont need to think about such things right now. There were still a few lingering questions he had about the chainling and the Crippled Star. Ill get some rest. Wake me up if Im late for lunch.

A few hours later there was someone who woke up Dallion, though it wasnt the shield. One of the advantages of being awakened or disadvantages, respectively was the ability to make out even faint rhythmic sounds. In this case, it was someone rattling on the outside of the door.

The room itself was constructed in such a fashion so as to be virtually soundproof, at least to the extent that Dallion could tell. Knocking on the door, though, was one of the exceptions.

Im up! Dallion jumped to his feet. Ill be down in a moment!

The rattling stopped. Judging by the tactful way in which he had been reminded of his shift, Dallion could only assume it was Jiroh. Hannah couldnt be so discreet if her life depended on it. Either way, it was time for his shift. Using his abilities to straighten his clothes, Dallion brushed his hair into shape as much as he could, then rushed to the door.

Im going to work, he said loudly for the guardians in the room to hear. After Im done, well be heading to the awakened shrine.

Dallion wasn't sure whether his weapons and gear needed to do something to prepare. That didn't prevent him from being a bit nicer.

Have fun while I'm gone. He left the room.

Chapter 139: Miscalculation

Work was slow and uneventful. The morning's events had brought in a few more people, mostly from the guild, but on the whole, there were two improvements and about a dozen mendings. The gains were far from what they had been when Dallion had started, but he didn't mind. If anything, he welcomed the calm.

When everything was over and all but a few regulars had left, Dallion went to have his lunch at the counter. Hannah had gone to take care of some supply issues and left Jiroh in charge of everything. The fury wasn't overly concerned, taking it as an opportunity to slack off a bit.

What are you thinking about? Jiroh asked.

Huh? Dallion looked up, startled.

You've been stirring your food. The fury pointed.

Dallion looked down. There were a number of circles on his plate dividing the food into several small piles.

Aspan will be mad if he sees you playing with his food like that.

Yeah. Dallion took a bite.

Jiroh was right, of course. Aspan was spending extra care to prepare the food of an awakened an incredible achievement, despite the increasing difficulty. Even after Dallion had reached the level cap of his perception, the food tasted just as wonderful as it had upon first arriving at the inn.

So, what's up? Jiroh pressed on.

I'll be going to the awakened shrine in a bit. Dallion didn't want to get into the entire chainling thing again.

Ah. Jiroh nodded, as if that explained it. Don't worry. You should be able to handle that without a problem. Eury tells me you catch on fast. Plus, you have some a-class gear.

That's not the issue. What will happen when I enter double digits? No one talks about it much, but I get the impression that things change. There was another pause. Was that when Eury left the inn and opened her shop?

Is that what you're worried about? Eury's leaving had nothing to do with her level. Despite what Hannah thinks, it had nothing to do with her either. There was a whole set of different circumstances. Besides, you're not Eury. If you like it here, you can stay. You don't have to work for your room, you know, you can pay like everyone else. It's a good place, better than most, and not that expensive when you start doing the higher-class jobs.

That made sense, and in a weird way it also made Dallion feel a bit better. True, he didn't have to leave the inn, and yet there was something troubling him. Back on Earth his parents would have said that was a sign of maturity. Here, he had no idea.

My advice the sooner you go, the better, Jiroh said. The more you delay, the more doubts you'll have. Get it over with and then fret about the consequences, if there are any. After you finish your meal, of course. Getting Aspan angry is never a good idea.

Dallion laughed. Deep down he knew that she was right. Finishing his plate, he then went up to get his gear. There was one last moment of hesitation, after which he grabbed the coin purse and headed out of the inn.

Yes, we are, Dallion whispered beneath his breath.

Okay. Will be nice to see what awakening trials have become after all this time.

According to Dallion's conversation with Nil, there were several awakening shrines in the city. The closest was about half an hour away, although the echo didn't recommend going there. Instead, Dallion was told to go to the central shrine, where the big crowds were. The reason, apparently, was that the city shrines, similar to small businesses, tended to maximize their time-money ratio. The more distant shrines did that by making the trial more difficult so that people had to take it more than once. In contrast the central shrine was at such a location, that it was more beneficial for it to have people complete the trial as fast as possible. Thus, the challenge was believed to be easier there. Dallion had no idea how an external force could cause a guardian to do anything, but he decided not to argue.

The streets were quite packed, despite the afternoon heat. After consulting the map in the ring library, Dallion decided to go along some of the more shaded alleys of the city. In addition to being cooler, most of them were far less crowded. Resorting to them would increase the walking distance by a few thousand feet, but at this point Dallion hardly cared.

Twenty minutes later, the shrine became visible in the distance. Unlike the one Dallion remembered from his village, this one had a massive structure surrounding it, rising four stories high. The entire building was made of flawless cyan marble possibly to indicate they were linked to the moon of awakening.

Suddenly a knife split the air. Thanks to his improved senses, Dallion heard it long before it approached and quickly jumped back just in time to see it hit the ground. Had he delayed even with a second, the weapon would have sunk in his leg.

Well, well, well. A figure appeared in the alley ahead. Much to Dallion's alarm, he had not sensed the figure's presence. Off to the shrine, right?

Dallion didnt answer. The appearance of the person ahead, along with her manner of speaking, made it clear that she wasnt here for a casual chat.

How about you give it a pass for today? Seeing how youre a guildie you can make up the money to try again in a month or two. So, why dont you hand over the coins like a nice boy and get on your way?

Dont bother. The city guard doesnt come around here. And even if they did, Id knife you long before they get close. You can have my guarantee on that.

Dallion reached for his harpsisword. The knife that suddenly made its way into the thiefs hand made him reconsider.

Youre a thief? Dallion asked.

Sure, why not? The woman kept her focus on Dallion. If this were the awakened realm, there probably would be target markers all over him. The purse, if you please?

Dallion calculated the odds. If she were alone, he had a pretty good chance of evading her attacks and running out of the alley before she could catch up. Failing that he could enter in a fight, although something told him that she would be tougher than the group of awakened hed come across in Drunkards End. This one meant business.

And if I dont? If only his dartbow was easily accessible and loaded with bolts that would have made this far easier.

Youre not new. If you were one of the five guilds, Id know about it. That means youre part of some small insignificant group which wouldnt be able to do crap. Id prefer not to hurt you, but

Dallion dashed forward. This whole time he had waited for her to blink to gain the upper hand, and when she had, he had descended upon her, Harpsisword in hand.

The thief didnt take long to react. At Dallions fifth step towards her, she had already left her spot. To Dallions surprise, she hadnt run away or moved to the side. Instead, she had charged right at him. At this point there was no way for him to evade her. Relying on his training, Dallion swirled to the side along a semicircle. In the awakened realms, he would have instantly slashed at her, but here he hesitated. The thought of injuring a person was still foreign to him. Unfortunately, it wasnt for her.

Without a moments pause, the thief slid beneath his shield arm, throwing a knife at his sword hand.

The pain felt like a prick that kept increasing until Dallion found himself dropping the harpsisword. There was nothing elegant or deep about its simple disarming attack then left him completely open.

A sharp kick to the side of the head followed, knocking Dallion to the ground and very much unconscious.

When Dallion next opened his eyes, he was alone in the alley. His pouch was missing, as were his shield and harpsisword. His first reaction was to check whether his boots were gone they weren't. The relief was short-lived as Dallion realized what had happened. He had been robbed for the first time since he'd arrived in the city. Shock combined with disbelief kept him on the ground, frozen as a statue, for several minutes. His mind was still trying to process the notion.

How was it possible for there to be an awakened thief in a city like this? Didn't the nobles see everything that happened within the city's realm? They should have been able to prevent this, or if not, they should have reacted fast enough to catch the perpetrator.

How had he managed to lose the harpsisword hours after seeing the guardian? Not only that, but the shield still belonged to the general. Now not only was he penniless, but he didn't have the gear needed to complete the trial, or any trial for that matter.

Overflowing with panic, Dallion looked around in the hopes of finding a clue to the thief's whereabouts. Some of the tracks were clearly visible, only to vanish completely after a while. It was as if she had jumped out of existence.

Left with little choice, Dallion rushed down the alley. His only chance was to catch up to her. With luck, the equipment she was carrying would slow her down enough so he could claim it back.

After running for ten minutes, though, there was still no sign of her. The new passers by Dallion had asked, hadn't seen anyone matching the thief's description. There was the option to go to the nearest bastion of the city watch. Given the lines and bureaucracy there, Dallion would most likely be asked to fill in a report of some kind, and wait. No, if he wanted to get things done, he had to resort to alternative methods.

Running as fast as he could, Dallion made it back to the Gremlins Timepiece.

Hannah! he shouted upon entering. The room was completely empty. The few regulars had left until evening, and neither Hannah nor Jiroh were anywhere to be seen. Jiroh!

Dal? The fury emerged from the kitchen. What's the matter? She stopped mid-step upon seeing him. You're bleeding.

Dallion looked at her, then at the blood dripping from his arm. That was right. He had been injured, but the pain had been driven away by anger and panic at the loss.

I he said, eyes burning with rage. They took my harpsisword. They took everything.

Chapter 140: The Mirror Pool

Back on Earth, everyone would be on their phones right in an urgent frenzy to get support, find information, or let the authorities know. There would be a lot of fuss, arguments, and frantic discussions of what should be done. Jiroh did none of that. The instant Dallion uttered the words, the fury grabbed his hand, ripping the sleeve to check the wound. The scary thing was that Dallion didnt even notice her move. Could it be the adrenalin had caused him to zone out?

Aspan, take care of things until Hannah comes back, Jiroh said in a loud clear voice. And tell Eury. We could sue her contacts on this.

A grumble from the kitchen suggested that the message had been heard and acknowledged.

Clean wound, Jiroh noted, then passed her hand over it. Dallion felt a momentary sting, after which the entire area seemed to go numb. Well take care of that later. Lets go. Youll tell me everything on the way.

Dallion had experienced a lot of weird things while in this world, as well as some back on Earth. He had often heard friends describe the feeling of being drunk to the extent that theyd felt like passengers in their own body while it did things on its own. This was different. Dallion felt as if the air around him was making his body float. He was still in control, he could move, walk, or even run, but he didnt need to.

You are an awakened, he said, looking at Jiroh.

Well get to that later. Now tell me what happened.

I was going to the central awakening shrine. It was too hot, so I used some of the back alleys I didnt think this could happen. I was warned about pickpockets, but He didnt finish his thought.

Since when had he become so complacent? Just because he had shown skill in the guild didnt mean a thing. The awakened werent deities, they could still be hurt, and the city authorities were not all-seeing despite the rumors that the Lord Mayor could feel everything within the area. It was arrogance that had caused this. If he had stuck to the main roads, or even given the pouch without thinking he could take his attacker, he would still have his gear.

Hey! Jiroh said. Snap out of it. You messed up, and thats why you need to be focused now. This wont be the only time things are taken from you, so Ill teach you how to get them back. And youll have to learn fast.

She was fast. Dallion tried to remember. I didnt hear her approach. She threw a dagger at me, then told me to hand over my pouch.

How did she just appear?

She just did. Almost like Hannah or you. Could it be that she was a fury? Dallion thought back. As far as he could remember she didnt look like an elf, rather she Come to think of it, Dallion couldnt remember what she looked like at all. She had throwing knives, adventurer clothes maybe, and I cant remember what she looked like, he said. I remember she didnt hide her face she had rings and bracelets, and

Dis-focus items. Jiroh said as they turned into an alley. It was strange how none of the people reacted to them, it was almost as if Jiron and Dallion had become invisible. They mess with the senses. Most likely the things you saw didnt happen the way you remember them. Did she say anything else? Threaten you in some way?

No. She just told me to hand over the pouch. Oh, she also said I didnt belong to the five guilds.

Upon hearing that, Jiroh hissed. Clearly it wasnt a topic she enjoyed.

What are the five guilds?

Later.

The fury picked up the pace. Surprising even for him, so did Dallion, or rather so did the surrounding air. In a matter of minutes, they had reached the spot in which Dallion had been mugged. The traces of blood were still there, as were the traces of the fight.

Dallion couldnt help but wonder what Jiroh was looking for. Even if her perception was greater than his, all tracks disappeared at one point. The only thing she could make out were the marks of the scuffle, and that wasnt more informative than what he had told her already.

As the fury let go of him, Dallion felt the air bubble around him disappear. She then went further down the alley, stopping at one point.

Is this where she appeared? Jiroh asked.

A bit further away. At least Dallion thought his attacker had been a bit further away.

The fury took a few steps further. Here?

Looks about right. Dallion looked around. Yeah, I think thats the spot. What are you doing?

Did you notice any clouds in the sky?

Clouds? Dont think so. Whats this have to do with clouds? Im not sure. I didnt look up.

Ill take that as a no. She walked towards him, then five steps away suddenly stopped. If its any relief, you never had a chance. She could have taken you anytime. No matter what you did shed have taken your gear.

You say she used daggers?

Looked like it, Dallion replied, although he was no longer sure. Do you have any idea who she is?

Not exactly. I dont know her personally, but I know of her, as well as the group shes part of.

That didnt bode well. Dallion swallowed. Up to now hed known Jiroh as nothing else but the carefree elf-waitress that had a mysterious past. Right now, there was nothing carefree about her expression.

You were attacked by a fury, she said. A fury thats part of the mirror pool.

Whats the mirror pool? Dallion couldnt help but ask. His imagination kicked in, linking his fight against the chainling with the theft, going so far as to suspect whether his attacker wasnt a chainling herself.

The mirror pool is the awakened underground.

It took Dallion a split second to enter his ring library and over three minutes to wrap his head round what he had heard. This wasn't the first time he'd heard about illegal activities and underground dealings. For the most part he had assumed that people were talking about a band of awakened, or even a guild of shady nature, that were in control of certain territories. It turned out that things were rather more complex.

According to the rink echo, there was an entire structure that mirrored that of the city from where the name mirror pool originated. Just as the city was based on a hierarchy of nobles based on their awakened strength, so the underworld had their mirror aristocrats. The pickpockets that Dallion had heard of, the few illegal gangs he had heard of, all were part of this loosely connected organization. And just like the city above, strength determined one's power, however, strength of a different nature.

Since the ruling nobles and the city captains of Nerosal did indeed have the ability to sense things in their domain, the strength of the mirrors" was based on how undetectable they were. Those who were not as undetectable, even if they were faster or stronger, quickly found themselves captured and cast out of the city, or worse. The reason that Dallion was only wounded, and not seriously at that, was because bodies tended to stir things up too much, at least unless there were considerable sums of money involved.

What Nil reluctantly shared was that there were a few unspoken rules between the Nerosal and the mirror pool. The Order of the Seven Moons and the high nobility were not to be touched. Anyone caught disobeying this rule, even if stealing a few copper coins, would be hunted down and made an example of. The mirrors were also discouraged from getting directly involved with the five major guilds of the city as well as the city watch. Everyone else was pretty much fair game.

Thinking about his incident, though, Dallion had to admit the person who had mugged him, was pushing the envelope a lot. In his view, targeting a person on their way to the awakening shrine to undergo a trial was nothing less than stealing. Apparently, no one else was of the same opinion.

While Dallion considered what to do, in the timelessness of the ring library, the echo brought him a few scrolls regarding the mirror pool of Nerosal. Why such information existed in the library and how it was so accurate was curious, though given that Nils original was a guild captain, there was some logic to him keeping himself informed.

Reading through the scrolls, Dallion learned that the underworld of the city was rather large, ranging into the thousands. While each group carved out its own territories, there were a total of three mirror earls that claimed dominion over the entire city. Each earl had up to a dozen lieutenants who had the title mirror knights, who kept activities in the area in check. If it hadn't been for Dallion's experience, he might have found the whole thing interesting, even fascinating. His missing harpsisword and shield, though, made him boil with hatred at the efficiency of the organization.

In addition to these underworld titles, the heads of powerful crime families were also known as mirror counts. In one of the scrolls there was also the mention of the existence of a mirror prince, although the rank was under question.

The scariest thing was that anybody had the potential of being part of the mirror pool, of even a mirror aristocrat. For all Dallion knew, someone from the Icepicker guild itself might be involved. That could be how they had known he would go to the awakening shrine. Nil, of course,

vehemently opposed such a train of thought arguing that there were ways to determine whether someone was of the mirror pool, and that such people wouldnt be admitted in the guild. However, that didnt fill Dallion with too much confidence.

Its unlikely you were targeted, Nil said, as he retrieved the scrolls. The mirror pool doesnt like to cause ripples. As cold as it might sound, you were just unlucky.

Unlucky Dallion felt his anger return.

The fact that the awakened that faced you didnt ask about your guild means that she was acting on a whim. Maybe she wanted your harpsisword, maybe she was looking for some quick coin.

Why would an awakened bother steal such an amount? She definitely was at a double-digit level. What could she do with eleven coins?

Not much, but who says you were the only one? the echo sighed. Did you think that maybe all the ones before you just gave the money? Remember, she didnt say an amount. She might have even thought that you were a semi.

If you want my advice, the best course of action is to return to the guild and let them handle things. Its not like Jiroh could do a lot alone, and as you just saw, youre out of your depth.

You really know how to cheer a person up, Dallion grumbled.

Its not about cheering up, its about finding the optimal course of action. If you were stronger, it might be a somewhat different matter, but even

Dallion had had enough. Not letting the echo finish, he left the library, returning to the real world.

This might get rough, Jiroh continued, unaware of Dallions temporal absence. As far as she was concerned, he had been there the entire time. Well need some backup, but I think we can pull it off. Are you willing to see it through?

Definitely. Dallion narrowed his eyes.