

Leveling up 421

Chapter 421: Gate of the Initiate

Focused splitting Dallion had seen it several times before, always done by Eury. At the time, he thought it was specific to the gorgon due to her incredible perception level. Apparently, he was mistaken. In reality, it was a learned ability that Vend knew and was now using with lethal precision. It took the combined efforts of Harp and Vihrogon to keep him from seriously harming Dallion. Had this been a real confrontation, either of them would likely have no issue dealing with the lieutenant. Unfortunately, as guardians, they were bound by Dallion and couldn't use their full abilities, even in the awakened realm. What they were displaying at present was part of what they could achieve with the skills they were allowed to use.

Given a few weeks, he might well have learned how to use the combat splitting similar to Vend. That wasn't an option, though. Right now, the only thing he could do was to think of an alternative solution.

At Vends speed, the defense markers were useless, as were any attempts to complete a sequence. Each time Dallion had made a few steps towards finishing a guard sequence, Vend would interrupt by throwing a hundred instances of a dagger.

Ever since he'd known her, the nymph had given him good advice. This time, though, he wasn't sure he could follow it. The recklessness that had been with him ever since his awakening pushed him forward, only this time it was a more focused recklessness.

Both guardians understood. A moment later, they, and all of their instances, vanished. The armadil shield was back, strapped to Dallions left arm, and a triangular hammer was in his right.

One on one? Vend asked, standing ten feet from Dallion. Want a repeat of what happened when you fought March?

You're not March. Dallion gripped the hammer tighter. You're not even Vend.

Given my skills, I might as well be. The man's left arm moved up along his side, creating a fan of instances. The simplicity of the action was impressive enough to make anyone who knew a thing about combat splitting swallow in fear. Decades of practice had gone into polishing a gem of natural talent.

With each thump of his heart, Dallion felt fear spread through his being like a spiderweb of cracks. The more he considered the situation, the more he saw himself failing. It appeared that any move he made was going to be a mistake. The future fight played out in his mind dozens of times then, suddenly, a realization came to mind that made the fear disappear completely.

If combat splitting was everything, you'd have been a captain ages ago, Dallion said. Or even a noble.

To his surprise, Vend nodded.

We all have our flaws. That's why we take great pains to hide them.

Instances of arms appeared all around him, as Vend met his attack. There was no doubt that Dallion couldnt do anything to prevent from getting hit, so he didnt bother. While the instances were done at split-second speed, the actions were much slower.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

Three red rectangles appeared in front of Dallion, stacking one after the other. Seeing them almost made him laugh. All this time he was so terrified of getting hit that he didnt even consider that the damage was laughably low. It would take Vend another ten strikes to get him to defeat Dallion. In the end, it was all math, and according to the math, Dallion had plenty of time for one good strike.

Holding the hammer tightly, he raised it in the air. However, instead of attacking along a vertical arc as was normal to do in hammer swinging, Dallion thrust it forward, as if it were a sword.

Vend took a step back. Engaging in focused splitting, he wasnt able to leap out of the way, counting that the strike wouldnt be enough to deal enough damage to him for Dallion to win outright.

Darude, Dallion said, focusing all his remaining strength in a final line strike. It was all or nothing. If he succeeded, the trial would be over. If not it would be over with a somewhat different outcome.

A dull pain passed through his entire body, draining him of energy. Then, a single point emerged from the front-most part of the hammerhead, extending forward.

POINT DESTRUCTION

(+2 Body)

Doing a point attack is a feat on its own. However, it comes at a price. Doing it unprepared has a tendency to hurt the arm that did it, so keep that in mind.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 50%

The last thing that Dallion was able to see of vend, before his strike had sent him flying away) was how it had broken both his arms as the lieutenant was attempting to protect his chest. Clearly, that hadnt succeeded, because a new rectangle had emerged, informing Dallion that he had broken through his fortieth barrier. No doubt this was the point at which he was going to be asked to choose a focus to improve. However, before he could, his surroundings blurred into darkness.

His body had lost all sensation. Darkness wrapped him completely, then was replaced by endless whiteness.

You still have to make the choice, a calm female voice said. In many aspects, it sounded almost identical to Euryales.

Instinctively, Dallion cracked an eye open. The room he was in had the general characteristics of the paradox cube, even if it was a lot smaller and static. The damage was still there, though, visible all over the walls and ceiling. The green rectangle continued to be a foot from his face, along with five smaller rectangles underneath representing the choices. Also, there seemed to be the silhouette of a figure behind.

Dallion reached up and touched the perception option. As expected, all the rectangles disappeared into fading pixels.

Cute choice, the figure said.

With the rectangles gone, Dallion could see it clearly she was a woman dressed in a combination of glowing white clothes and incandescent armor. Three pairs of gauntlets, at least, hung from her belt, as if she had the habit of changing them frequently. Most important of all, the woman was a gorgon.

Emion, Dallion whispered.

I've no idea why Felygn chose you, the Moon said unapologetically. In this aspect, her attitude was very similar to that of Euryale. Most probably, that was a gorgon thing. You excel in certain areas, but at the same time leave such flaws that a child with the right combination of skills and gear could give you a hard time.

Knowing you, you'll probably push forward as you always do, but I'll still say that I don't think you should continue through the next gate. You've already plenty of skills and abilities, including one you're not supposed to have. The snakes on her head stirred in a sign of minor irritation.

You're asking me to stop leveling?

It would be a shame for you to end your journey here, but it would be better for you. I know that each time you are told that beyond the gate, things become dangerous, and that is true. But from this point on, death and banishment aren't just theoretical concepts. By stepping through the gate, you are in effect, saying that you are strong enough not to rely on our help. You understand, right?

So, I'm on my own against the Star?

All of the Moon's snakes turned to stare at him. The experience was painful, making Dallion prefer that he went through another fight like the one he'd nearly lost than to be subjected to this for much longer. It felt as if each and every single one of the snakes was making its way through his eyes and into his brain. Thankfully, after a second it was over and the snakes returned to their usual state.

We still protect the world, Emion said. If you are attacked directly, we'll intervene, same as we'll intervene if you break any of the vows and rules. If you go seeking trouble on your own, you're fair game.

Dallion had a notion that would be the price, although he didn't consider it said in such direct fashion. The previous Moons always acted more like friends or guides, explaining things carefully and thoroughly, as if they wanted Dallion to continue on. In this case, he was directly threatened with consequences, and quite serious ones at that.

What lies beyond the gate? he asked.

You must decide whether you want to go before you learn.

Isn't it supposed to be the other way round?

No.

The response was clear despite the complicated framework of rules, it was the Moons that created them, and they had the discretion to change them however they wished. The Green Moon had done that to Dallion's advantage in the past, so there was no reason for him to complain now.

Can I ask something else, then?

You're wondering whether everything said in the thirty-nine trial was true, the Moon said, in an almost annoyed voice. Whether you can return to your world or another. Would it matter if it were? You've already made your choice, and there's no way to undo it.

Why wasn't there a way to the gorgon world?

You assume I should know or tell you?

You are the Moon of gorgons. Dallion answered the first half of the question.

There was a moment of silence. The Moon put a finger on her chin and tapped a few times.

There are ways to go to that world, she said at last. Not many of them, but some. It's possible for her to find them, but not you.

So, there's no way for me to join"

I've answered your question, she interrupted. Now you must answer mine. Do you want to step through the gate, or have you had enough leveling up?

Now it was Dallion's turn to remain silent.

As I said, you have more than enough abilities to make it far in this world, abilities you're completely unaware of. Domain sealing, link breaking, focus splitting. It would take you a lifetime to learn them all.

Eury went through the gate, Dallion said.

She did. The Moon's snakes stirred. Does that mean you'll follow?

Yes. The single word echoed throughout the room, bouncing off the walls as if it were a rubber ball. Long after Dallion had closed his mouth, he continued to hear its echo.

Cracks were everywhere, though different from the ones Nox could make. Entire rectangles were peeling off, transforming the space into an open field beneath the sky. As Dallion looked, any trace of stone disappeared, replaced by an endless meadow with a single iron gate in the middle of it.

Seven Moons shone in the dark sky, their rays focusing on the area around the gate.

Walls won't be an issue from now on, the White Moon said. Once you take the final step, there will be nothing to keep you back. There won't be anything to keep the threats from reaching you, either.

I understand.

For the first time since she had appeared, the Moon smiled. It was a slight smile that quickly faded away, but it was there nonetheless.

I'd tell you that you could use a spark to fight the creatures of the wilderness, but you were given that already. A note of disapproval returned to her voice. That comes as part of our blessing. You can channel part of our power in combat, as well as to bless items.

Dallion's hair stood on end, though not out of fear.

Yes, that means you'll finally be able to create emblems to shield you in the wilderness, as long as you have the knowledge to do so.

The timing was quite convenient. Furthermore, it explained why Euryale had asked Dallion to wait until he passed the gate before going to the Orders temple regarding his newly created emblem.

Also, that allows you to modify the structure of your domainsomething you can definitely do with. The glow of the Moons intensified. From today, you are no longer a seer. You're an initiate.

Thank you. Dallion didn't know what to think. Not even two years after his awakening, and he had reached levels he didn't think possible. What was more, he had virtually become the same rank as Dame Vesuviasomeone who he believed at the time to have superhuman abilities.

Pass through the gate and don't discuss anything you've learned except to other initiates. The Moon turned around and started walking away.

Will I see any of you again? Dallion asked.

The white gorgon stopped. Several clusters of her snakes turned back, giving Dallion a semi-stare.

If you level up as many times as you already have, you'll reach the next gate. Achieve that and someone else will come have a talk with you.

Chapter 422: New Hunt

Up till now, he always believed the title to be reserved for the Order of the Seven Moons. The first instance he had heard of it was when the Archdukes envoy had come to Dherma village, gathering volunteers for a hunt. The second was when Euryale had addressed one of the battle clerics they had recently come across. Back then, Dallion thought that the gorgon was being respectful. In reality, she was reminding him that they held the same awakened rank. What really had blown Dallion's mind, however, was the revelation that so many of his acquaintances were in fact initiates: all the hunters, all the elites, lieutenants, and captains of the Icepicker guild actually, all the guilds were probably the same. It was little wonder that the cities had impressed Dallion's grandfather as well as the former village chiefthey were both magnificent and terrifying places. It was well known that Neorsal had thousands of awakened. However, it also had hundreds of people who had the power to fight monsters of the wilderness, not to mention make their own emblems.

While the new gate allowed Dallion to transform and modify his realm as he saw fit, the same didn't go for his echoes. As Nil shared, now that Dallion was allowed to hear, echoes only retained those skills and abilities of their original that were available at the point of creation. That stood to reason, but it also meant that for the more major things within his realm, Dallion couldn't rely on them.

Just give me a while to get used to the notion. I haven't brought the news to Eury yet.

The joke wasn't even particularly good, but it made Dallion smile. Going through the gate had not only changed his perspective of the world, it had also made all the fears and concerns evaporate. It was natural to feel powerful after each awakened gate, but this time Dallion felt especially so. From here on, he was strong enough not to rely on the Moons for every little thing. He could also get back to leveling up his skills now that he had a new level cap.

Dallion trembled, with excitement the entire way back to Euryales workshop. Every few steps he felt like jumping on the roof of a building and shouting for all to hear that he had become an initiate. In fact, he had done just that through one of his combat splitting instances. He had no idea what the results were he didn't have the mental stamina to maintain the length of his combat splitting for that long but even so, Dallion had enough of self-preservation instincts not to try and find out. At least not yet.

An unusual smell greeted him the moment he approached the workshop's door. It wasn't a bad smell, quite on the contrary, based on the nuances in the aroma, Dallion could tell that someone had gone through a lot of trouble to make a particularly appealing feast. The only issue was that the someone in question couldn't be Euryale. The gorgon had many positive qualities, but gourmet cooking wasn't something she enjoyed or bothered doing.

Cant do that. I promised Id keep it a secret.

Dallion shook his head. He never thought he'd see the day when buildings would refuse to tell him what was going on, because they were part of his surprise party.

Hey, Dallion said as he entered.

Initially, he was expecting to see a crowd of people possibly Jiroh among others. Instead, the only person in the room was his girlfriend. He could feel a sense of pride coming emanating from her, along with the usual affections.

You're not wearing your blocker, he said, somewhat surprised.

Ill put it on later, the gorgon said with a sly smile. For now, I thought Id let you enjoy seeing some emotions while we eat.

Dallion was left completely speechless. This was quite the gesture on her part. The workbench was meticulously cleaned and mended, and covered with a vast assortment of food that could only have come from one place to Neorsal.

No need to look so glum, Eury said. Like I said, I thought you deserve a break now and then.

That much was true, although Dallion had been getting a lot of them lately. The last few weeks were comparable to the time he had first arrived at Nerosal. Of course, this time he had to work a bit more for his gains.

Carefully, Dallion removed his gear, placing it on a few of the shelves, then joined Eury at the workbench. The food tasted even better than usual, possibly because Dallion had increased his perception since the last time he had eaten. Eury's unadulterated company was also a blessing. In that short sliver of time, there weren't hunters, heroes, or even awakened, but just a young couple enjoying a meal. For once, the world didn't matter.

The conversation revolved around trivialities, sometimes veering off towards forging, tools, and armor. Now and again an item guardian would join in with a comment, though even that was rarer than usual. As Dallion had noticed, not all guardians were able to talk to one another. Somewhat mostly the non-banished ones weren't able or willing to talk at all. In this case, most of them knew better than to interrupt the special moment.

It took less than an hour for the food to vanish, mostly consumed by Dallion. The conversation, however, continued up till first light. Only then did the world remind them of its existence in the

form of a brief visit from the city guard. The guardsman never came in. Aware of the importance of the mini-power couple, he stood outside, hastily handing a sealed scroll to Eury when she had answered the door, then left on his way.

Work? Dallion asked as the gorgon broke the seal.

The overseer wants me to explore a new section of the underground ruins, Eury said, skimming through the scroll. There still are a few cultists in the city, it seems, and she wants to be sure there isnt a repeat of last time.

Need any help from me?

No, its an easy task. Im just one of the people she actually trusts to do it. With everyone else involved in one way or another, a hunter is the best solution. Nothing for you to worry about.

That made sense, if it werent for the fact that she was hiding something. Dallion couldnt feel any fear coming from her, but an unusual amount of hatred flashed through her, if only for a second.

Any news on Jiroh? he asked.

Yes, and no. A messenger came from Halburn. Shes gone north for a job. No details, so I expect its connected to her home. Either that or shes been roped into some task for someone important. Wouldnt be the first time it has happened. Bottom line is shell be away for a few more weeks.

For some reason, the news made Dallion feel slightly down. He had hoped that the fury would be back soon, so they could set off on the next trip. As good as things had been, staying in Nerosal was starting to get on his nerves again.

I also got a new hunter request, the gorgon went on. Theres been sightings of an avian crackling in the region east of the city. It seems to be a young creature, so the countess hasnt sent out troops so far. I think thisll be a good opportunity for you.

Dallions heart skipped a beat. This was what he had been waiting for: his second chance at a solo hunt, and one right up his wheelhouse. Avian cracklings were, in general, quite rare. Dallion had seen entire swarms of them during his expedition in the world sword back when he was a member of the icepicker guild, but that wasnt the real world. Out in the wilderness, the monsters knew better than straying too close to the Moons. Even so, every now and again, something would appear that ignored common conventions and had to be dealt with.

If I beat it, can I keep it? Dallion asked.

Sure, as long as the overseer doesnt see any harm.

Is she the client?

No. Eury said, indicating this wasnt a matter she was willing to discuss.

When do I set off?

Anytime you want, although Id prefer if its tomorrow morning. I want you a bit for myself tonight.

That was an offer Dallion found he couldnt refuse. Besides, it was going to take him at least half a day to prepare for the trip. Eury slipped on her blocking ring, then took some light combat gear and went to deal with the overseers issues.

Alone again, Dallion spent a dozen hours in an item to get some sleep, then left as well to stock up on supplies he would need for the trip. Given the nature of the creature and the vagueness surrounding its whereabouts, he found it was prudent to get enough for a full month in the wilderness. When travelling, water was the greatest issue. Being an awakened, Dallion could easily hunt for food, but water was never a certainty. The villages he was going to visit certainly were going to have enough to share, but he needed something to drink until he got there.

It took Dallion several hours to buy the equipment he thought necessary for his trip. With the rumors of tensions between the empire and a few other kingdoms, most of the gear necessary for outside travel was bought out by merchants or soldiers assigned to the new Nerosal garrisons. What was left was of poor quality, and required a lot of running around to get. Fortunately, Dallion wasn't worried about the quality; all he needed to do was mend and potentially improve an item once or twice to get it in a good enough state for travel.

Another chunk of true time was spent in the ring library, where Dallion went through all available information regarding avian cracklings. Outside of the creatures rare occurrence, there was quite a lot on the creatures habits. Apparently, at some point in the past, a flock of such crackligns had caused ruin, famine, and devastation in an entire province on the empire, to the point that the imperial legions had to get personally involved. The Archduke who had allowed the disaster to occur was quickly deprived of his title, status, and name, not to mention he had been placed in a prison item for twenty years. Given the devastation described, though, Dallion thought that the noble in question had gotten it easy.

The avians were indeed capable of massive destruction, not because they were particularly cunning or vicious, but rather to their nature. As any bird, it was normal for them to perch on anything of interest. Due to the nature of their talons, however, the unfortunate structures they perched upon had the tendency to crack up and crumble soon after, forcing the bird to find a new perch and thus continue the devastation.

Why? Are you afraid itll cause too much havoc in my realm?

Im rather terrified at the notion of a crackling cat constantly chasing after a crackling bird. You were fortunate that Lux was too different for Nox to show any interest. If you bring another of his kind, however things might be less peaceful.

On cue, a meow suggested that was exactly what would happen.

Quite. Id be more pleased if you had turned down the task, however.

Dont you start as well. I can handle this!

Im sure you could handle most things. However, for an avian to have emerged in the open, it must be confident that its capable of handling anything the wilderness throws at it, including awakened soldiers. Theres no doubt it isnt as powerful as the specimens that caused blights throughout entire provinces, but if it were a mere nuisance, the requests for help wouldnt have reached the second capital of the county. Keep that in mind.

Chapter 423: Envoy of Nerosal

The air was crisp when Dallion left Nerosal. The sun had yet to rise, making it the perfect time to leave the capital unseen. The guards were vaguely aware of his task, so they let him out without issue. From there on, it was a long trip to the area of the crackling sighting.

To a degree, Dallion agreed. Faint traces of guilt lingered that he had left while the gorgon was asleep. Technically, she had the habit of doing just that, especially after a night of fun. However, she mostly go to assist with guard errands, not leave the city for a hunt.

Lets hope youre right.

From the scant information Dallion had managed to obtain, the first request for help had come from a small village called Vadle. The place was quite insignificant, located close to the border with the wilderness. Similar to Dherma, it was technically part of the county, although lacked any threat of strategic significance to the point that it like the other villages in the area was left to its own accord. The only thing different was that unlike Dallions own village, it hadnt self-isolated itself, at least to the point that it would take the destruction of an avian crackling to send someone to a larger city for help.

Thinking back, Dallion still wasnt certain whether the former village chief of Dherma had known about the chainling or not. Without a doubt, the mess had been a big enough deal to get the Archduke of the province involved.

As he walked, Dallion instinctively touched the new pendant hanging from his neck. While he had obtained the power to bless it into an emblem, he had preferred to wait a bit until he knew more on the matter. A visit to a temple of the Order was going to be necessary, after all. Hopefully, there would be one in the area where he was going. After everything that had happened with the Vermillion rings, Dallion didnt trust the members of the Order in Nerosal.

Try your best.

It was going to be at least a day until Dallion had to worry about that, anyway. The creatures of the wilderness didnt like being close to cities the bigger the settlement, the further away they kept from it, and at present Nerosal shared the spot for largest city in the province. From what Dallion had found out, there were less than a dozen of equal size and only three larger, including the capital of the province itself.

Time flowed on. The sun appeared on the horizon, marking the official start of the day. Morning began, giving way to noon, then evening. And all the time, Dallion kept walking. He wasnt particularly fast, but managed to maintain a constant pace, making him in effect more efficient than nearly all creatures all non-magical ones, at least. At his present rate, it was looking like hed reach Vadle in three days, which was much faster than doing so by horse.

Come to think about it, that was the reason Dame Vesuvia was the only one on horseback during the chainling hunt. The horse was nothing more than a status symbol. With all the soldiers being double-digits or possibly seers, it was more efficient to have them walk, even if the volunteers like Dallion brought the pace down significantly.

By evening, Dallion stopped to take a quick break and have a bite. As far as he could sense, there werent any dangerous creatures in the vicinity, but even so, Dallion didnt make a fire. From what Eury had told him, the creatures that were cautious of fire werent a threat, anyway. It was the rest that he had to worry about and provoking them by making himself obvious was best avoided.

That was somewhat confusing. In the last few months Dallion had traveled a fair bit throughout the wilderness. While it was described with a single word, the place was quite different. There were

barren areas, just as there were lush areas forests, lakes, mountains. The only thing that connected them was the absence of guardians. In this case, the area resembled a steppe mixed with the occasional small forest. The area wasn't particularly fertile, but food wasn't lacking either.

In Dallion's realm, Lux chirped, confused.

It might be a bit tough for you, but compared to the actual monsters, the thing you're facing is just that a chick that leaves a huge mess behind it. Before I got captured, I used to deal with them all the time.

The way she said it implied that she had destroyed them. So much for the creatures of the wilderness working together. It really was a beast-eat-beast world out there. As disturbing as it was, Dallion could see her point of view. The thing about avian cracklings was that they remained constantly on the move since they destroyed their nesting and perching spots. That would be extremely annoying for creatures whose established lairs suffered as a result.

After he was done with the nap, and the far longer snooze in his awakened realm, Dallion continued with his trip.

Naturally, Gen had taken the opportunity to have Dallion skim through his new design of the realm. There was no doubt about it, that it was far better than a corridor of rooms. It took dedication to arrange forty different spaces, not mentioning the domains of the linked items, into one homogenous whole. As much as Dallion would have loved to go through all that, though, at the moment, that was of lesser significance and thus a distraction. Using his new ability, he transformed his realm into a large-scale copy of Gen's creation, then exited back into the real world.

Nothing of particular interest occurred during the night. The highlight was a misguided attack by a small pack of plain-wolves. The creatures had mistaken Dallion for a misguided traveler, and had charged at him, hoping to get some fresh grub. Instead, Dallion had ended up procuring himself a few pelts, and an increase of his zoology skills.

The following days were no different. Most of the time was spent walking, with short intervals for Dallion to rest, eat, and relieve himself. Now and again, some night predator would attempt to attack, and bitterly regret it. This suggested that Gleam was right, and the avian wasn't going to be too big a threat any place that had normal creatures roaming about freely meant that they were on the top of the food chain.

On the fourth day, Dallion sensed the faint smell of smoke in the air. With autumn approaching, it was normal for people to start burning more wood. This year, the cold was starting much sooner than last. In truth, in a few months Dallion was going to experience his very first winter. Based on his memories, that was something he didn't look forward to.

That doesn't make sense.

When dealing with creatures of the wilderness, little makes sense. All you have to go by are the things they leave behind.

Dallion couldnt disagree more. Everything Eury and the other had taught him had to do with predicting the behavior of wilderness creatures. While initially illogical, all of them had their own patternmostly a reaction to stimuli. Nil, however, continued to insist that as long as there wasnt a well-defined logical explanation, their behavior could be nothing but chaotic. Listening to him was like listening to an academic that knew everything about the world, despite never setting a foot outside of his home.

After another few hours of walking, the village came into view. It was a small thing, composed of some fifty structures all huddled behind a shoulder-high wall of stones. The condition of the wall suggested that an awakened had taken care of it. As he got closer, however, Dallion saw that the wall was the only thing that remained maintained. Several of the other structures, including the village mill, were in a considerably worse state. It didnt take any detective work to tell that the focus was on keeping the town secure than anything else.

Going to the village reminded him of the way Dame Vesuvia had entered his own village. The difference was that the dame was an official envoy and had the troops to prove it. On his part, Dallion had the skills of an initiate, which was good enough.

Out of habit, Dallion split into instances as he approached the village gate. Normally, villages of this size didnt have dedicated guards. The fact that there were several people at the gate, not to mention something that, based on the roughly made lookout tower, suggested that there had been a number of unpleasant instances lately.

Theres no need for that, a small woman at the gate said.

At first glance, she looked quite unimpressive, wearing the standard village clothes: simple leather boots, beige trousers, a simple blouse covered by a thick fur coat, and most of all not a single weapon to be seen. Thanks to Dallions high perception, though, he could see that she was an awakened. While crude in design, the clothes were flawless and made of fine cotton.

Double digit? Dallion asked.

Enough to be noticed, the woman replied. Dallion could feel suspicion oozing from her. Banra, first awakened of Vadle.

Dal, he introduced himself. Ive come from Nerosal regarding your avian issue.

The city actually sent someone? Barna sounded surprised. Wonders never cease. Maybe that whole mess was useful after all.

Dallion didnt say a word. Clearly, the Stars attempt to destroy the city had become known throughout the empire. At least the woman didnt recognize him.

Maybe it was. Dallion nodded. So, whats the issue with the avian.

Well, thats the thing. The woman sighed. Its not just one.

Chapter 424: Crackling Breeder

It was pretty much a rule that things rarely ended up being what one expected. The moment he learned what an avian crackling was, Dallion knew that there was more to the task than Eury made it out to be. His girlfriend had the annoying habit of considering things easier than they ended up being, the single exception being Dallions skill requirements to become an apprentice hunter. In this

case, the avian that he had come to defeat wasn't a mere crackling bird, but a nester. Cracklings, as the name suggested, didn't have the ability to breed. The way they multiplied was causing enough damage to a realm, so more of them would be created. It was a strange process, verging with alchemy. In Earth terms, Dallion could only express it as the visual value of entropy and decay associated with an item.

In the real world, things were even more complicated. There was no official explanation as to their appearance. From what Dallion could tell, all that was known was that they would occasionally appear in the wilderness though never in a settlement domain and gain an autonomy of their own. The Order of the Seven Moons claimed that all monsters were star-spawn, created by the Crippled Star itself. Whatever the truth, cracklings, chainlings, cutlings, and other similar creatures would roam about the world, devastating anything they came in contact with until they were destroyed. Occasionally, in extremely rare circumstances, a crackling with the ability to create others like it would appear. In such cases, the monsters were referred to as breeders.

Dallion wasn't willing to agree with the last part, but he had to admit it was looking as if he might have bitten off more than he could chew. However, since he had already made the decision, there was no backing out now, at least not if he wanted to become a hunter, that is.

Taking a sip of watered-down alcohol, Dallion looked around. He was in the village tavern. Normally, the place would be full of people who'd come here to get a drink and unwind from their daily toil. With the village chief's home being no bigger than a standard house, the tavern also doubled as the meeting place of the village elders, where important decisions were made, and outside guests welcomed.

The door opened with a slam as the village chief entered a massive man with arms the size of tree trunks, all dressed in thick furs. Without a doubt he was also an awakened, although seemingly a lesser level than Banra. Well past his sixties, the man was entirely bald, compensating his loss of hair with a huge gray beard. Tanned rough skin suggested that the man had seen his share of work, more than likely still going out in the field, unlike some village chiefs Dallion had known in the past.

That him? The man's voice boomed, filling the room. He's just a kid.

He's got the level, Banra said. And the stats.

And the skills, Dallion added, putting a few notes of agreeableness in his words. Mostly, he wanted to see whether any of the locals had music skills as well. As it turned out, they didn't.

I guess I have no choice, the village chief said. While the tone was stiff gruff, Dallion could tell that his attitude had changed drastically. There was no longer suspicion emanating from him, or any of the other four people in the tavern. Allas, get him something to drink.

Have you grown blind? He already has something! The tavern owner shouted back.

Then get me something! the chief yelled.

Brothers, Banra whispered, quietly enough for only Dallion to hear. Getting the picture, he nodded.

With obvious reluctance, the tavern owner far fatter, though with more hair took a half-empty bottle, then slammed it on the table where Dallion was sitting. The village chief glared at him, then took his seat at the table.

How much does he know? The village chief turned to Barna once again.

I told him were dealing with a breeder and its spawn, the woman replied.

So, you know pretty much everything.

That sounded extremely unlikely. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could sense that there was more hidden. However, it seemed it would take a nudge to get it.

Is that why youre only mending the village wall? he asked, adding more agreeableness to his words.

Were mending everything we could. Its just too much! The village chief took a gulp from the bottle. The wall is the only thing that those pesky birds avoid! Stay a few days and youll see. There always is a chick or two perching on some building. Most of them are easy to kill, but somewhere theres a big one that keeps making them, and until someone takes care of that, the small ones will keep coming.

That explained a few things, it also indicated that the avian was still in the general area.

Youve seen everything thats in the library. What do you expect me

Even as an initiate?

It doesnt have to do with the Moons. Youre just not ready to hear it now!

It was rare for Nil to be so adamant. After all this time, Dallion knew the echo well enough to know he wasnt getting any other information, no matter how much he pressed. And while it went a way to confirming Dallions suspicion, it didnt help him in the immediate situation.

And wheres the big one? Dallion asked.

If I knew that Id be out there hunting it! The old man took another gulp. Isnt that what youre supposed to do?

It was seen by a traveling merchant, the tavern owner said, visibly annoyed at his brother. Familiar guy. Comes through here every few months for logs. The bird swooped down at him and ruined his wagon. The man barely managed to get here alive. After that, the creature attacked this place, and a few of the other villages.

Anyone hurt? Dallion asked.

Not directly, Banra replied. One of the buildings collapsed on someone in another village. Theyre mostly fine.

If we dont stop those pests, we wont survive the winter, the village chief said. Harvest is hearing. So far, weve managed to repair the barns, but the chicks are getting more and more. If we lose the barns, we lose the food. If we lose the food

Ill take care of that, Dallion said. Here at least. I need to see the chicks in action. Is there any place I can stay?

The question made the people look at each other. Their initial suspicions and hostility had vanished, but they were still uncertain where to put him.

Vadle is a small place the old man began apologetically. We can ask about it, but it wont be anything youre used to. If you want, you can spend the night here. Its better than the barn mostly.

I dont need to sleep. I just need a place to stash my things for a while.

Ah. That can be arranged. The village chiefs mood improved. So, you think you can catch it?

If its what I think it is, sure. Dallion smiled. Any chance I can talk to the traveling merchant? Would be nice to know where he was attacked exactly.

Well. The thing about traveling merchants is that they travel. He left a week after the incident.

The conversation then shifted to Dallion. The villagers were interested in his skills, to the point that he was forced to do a demonstration and improve the table he was at to oak. That seemed to reassure them to the point that most lost interest. The village chief finished his drink, then left. Soon after, he was joined by Banra and the remaining few elders. Only the tavern owner remained and offered Dallion space in the storeroom to place his items. The space wasnt much, but enough for his backpack and shield. And just to make sure everything was in order, Dallion left his whip blade there as well, to keep watch.

Once that was over, Dallion went out to check the damage left behind. The village chief wasnt joking when he said that it was a blight on the people. The amount of cracklings in the realms affected by the avians was significant. Dallion had to spend hours in each to restore things to their former state.

As he went from one house to the next, a pattern started to emergeone that suggested that there was more than a flying crackling gone wild. While it was normal for the high buildings to be affected, there was little logic for all the barns to be as well. It was looking as if they were specifically targeted.

Eury used to say that the key to understanding every creature was to find what determined its behavior. The shadow griffins stole eggs so they could create offspring, the cutling wanted to lash out at the people it thought had subjected it to pain, and grow stronger in the process. What did the avian want? It wasnt to destroy the village, it would have done so already, if it had directed its entire swarm to Vadle. Instead, it focused on high buildings and barns.

The locals werent much help either. While all of them had witnessed several attacks, their description of events vastly differed. It was almost as if a different species had swooped down onto the village each time. The only consensus was that the creatures were no larger than a cat and had wings.

The attack pattern also strongly varies. At times the creatures would appear several times a week, while in other instances a month would pass without a single incident. As terrible as it was, Dallion hoped that the next attack would be soon. Seeing where the cracklings came from was definitely going to give him a starting point of finding the breeder. Also, he was really curious to see this new species.

Why dont you let me decide? Ive earned that much, I hope?

There was a long moment of silence. Dallion could feel the echos hesitation resonate throughout his entire realm. However, he had no idea as to the reason.

Dear boy, birds arent the only creatures with wings. Nor are all cracklings created in the realms. Some are born in the world itself.

Whats that supposed to mean?

Before the echo could answer, Dallion saw something in the distance. It was still sunset, so parts of the sky werent back. Several black dots had emerged, moving loser as they flew along an irregular pattern. It seemed he had gotten his wish: the village was about to be attacked by cracklings soon enough.

Chapter 425: Flock of Dragon Shadows

The flock that descended on the village wasnt particularly large. All in all, there were less than three dozen cracklings, flapping their wings eagerly as they approached. The number wasnt what bothered Dallion, however; it was the size, or rather the shape. The creatures werent birds or large bats they were miniature dragons, or at the very least something that would pass for such.

The moment he saw them, Dallion cursed himself for not realizing earlier. But how could he? Other than a few mentions here and there, he hadnt seen a dragon in the world so far. The Green Moon had asked him to find one, but when Dallion had looked into the subject, hed found that the creatures were unbelievably rare. Even scrolls barely mentioned them. And yet, here he was, looking at an entire flock.

They could have fooled me!

Not only did the creatures look like dragons, but they behaved similarly as well, heading directly towards those spots of the village that contained food, or rather livestock. That was the reason the barns suffered. The creatures didnt want to destroy the village they wanted to eat. That made even less sense, considering their nature. However, that was a problem for another time. Right now, Dallions only task was to help out and make sure that the village made it in one piece.

I can break through, but youll have to foot the bill.

Meanwhile, the village defenses had already sprung into action. A dozen people with flimsy bows started shooting at the invaders. The arrows did little in terms of harm, crumbling to bits the moment they touched the dragons scales. Occasionally, one would make it, causing the creature to burst in a puff of black dust. In many ways their death was similar to that in the realms, although here it felt a lot more real.

Dallion stood up and drew the harpsisword from the sheath on his back.

Sounds filled the air, louder than Dallion had ever played before. Despite there being no markers in the real world, Dallion felt the link being established between one of the creatures and his weapon. The dragonlet paused. No longer attempting to break through the roof, it flapped into the air, attracted by the sounds.

Thats it, Dallion said, as he played a second chord.

More of the cracklings turned his way. Those already in the air redirected their flight to the top of the mill, where Dallion was standing. The rest looked up, intrigued by the sounds, though not curious enough to fly there just yet.

The sound of breaking glass was heard a few houses away. Glancing down, Dallion saw the whip blade fly towards him.

Stay nearby, Dallion said, still playing. Make yourself invisible and dont do anything until I tell you.

If you say so

The whip blade disappeared. The dragonlets didnt seem to pay any notice, flocking towards Dallion in greater numbers. Remaining cautious, they flew around him in circles, trying to figure out exactly what he was. The curiosity that Dallion had unleashed through the strings of the harpsisword was doing its job. One single line strike and he could destroy two-thirds of the crackling infestation in an instant. However, two-thirds wasnt good enough.

Just a few more, Dallion told himself.

Around him, the cracklings were getting more aggressive. The uncertainty brought was starting to fade, and a few were moving closer, going so far as to attempt to hit Dallion with their small tails. Thanks to his combat splitting, none of them managed to do so, but the instances that dallion had to make to keep safe were progressively increasing.

Half a dozen more of the creatures joined in, leaving their preferred perches. Only a handful remained away, but Dallion could wait no longer. Taking a deep breath, then performed his attack.

The sword split the air. The real world, however, was harsher than the awakened realms, limiting the range of the line attack to several dozen feet. Nonetheless, that was good enough to slice through the majority of the gathered cracklings. Screams filled the air, as over twenty of them turned to dust.

Gleam, Dallion managed to utter as he fell to his knees, completely drained of strength. Finish them.

The whip blade flew into action. Still invisible, it didnt have any qualms attacking the creatures in their confusion. Several were sliced on the spot. A few attempted to flee, but were quickly pierced by the blade as well. That was the vast advantage to having indestructible weapons the standard crackling defenses were useless against them.

The fading stopped. Strength flowed within him from the sounds, reinvigorating Dallion to the point he didnt fear falling off. A few moments later, he even felt strong enough to stand up.

Dallions first reaction was to shout back that he wasnt old. On further reflection, though, he chose not to do so would only make the hammer guardian more annoying. Instead, he focused on what was done to the village. From what he could see there were several damage spots, mostly on barns on the edge of the village. Nothing seemed particularly serious, even the locals could do the mending, or replace the damaged segments, if that was easier. The avians had mostly been killed off. Gleam was chasing the last remaining few, who had never fought an invisible enemy before.

All clear! Banra shouted from the ground. Theyre gone!

Right, Dallion replied, putting in as much force as he could in his voice. Ill be right down.

Nice to see youre not all talk. With this many, I feared wed lost half the village.

They werent after the village. They were after the barns.

You can tell us about it later. Get some rest! Well deal with this.

Dallion attempted to protest, but it was pointless. Anyone who was an awakened knew exactly how exhausting his attack had been and pretty much dragged him to a bed in the village chiefs house. Being too weak to offer any resistance, Dallion complied.

It took less than a second for him to pass out once he had lied down. When he next woke up, it was already morning. Two large mugs of honey water were placed on the ground beside the bed, as well as several baskets of fruit.

Dallion didnt even pause to complain, gobbling down everything as if there was no tomorrow. Only upon finishing did he feel somewhat alive.

How about the time you saw the sand dragon?

Dallion blinked.

Yes, I know about that, just as I know pretty much everything that has happened to you since your awakening. Ive been living in your realm for centuries from my point of view. Did you think I wouldnt learn about your past? The reason I didnt say anything on the matter was because I didnt want to burden you.

I thought I had to share things in order for that to happen.

And what do you think you do when you sleep? Or when you dream? Why do you think its so dangerous to have your realm invaded? Anyone can whisper suggestions. What makes invading echoes really dangerous is learning your secrets so that you no longer can distinguish between your thoughts and theirs.

That thought sent chills down Dallions spine. All of a sudden, he felt as if he were back in Dharma with an echo put in his realm by the village chief.

I do what I think is best for you. All of us do. We follow your instructions, of course, but we also have our own opinions on various matters. Going after something you knew so little about was a bad decision, or rather, is something I believe to be a bad decision. Vihrogon was of the opinion that you should learn on your own. I still contend that you arent ready.

There was no way to respond to this. In the eyes of the old echo, Dallion was never going to be ready. Harp also seemed to share his opinion. The two were among the oldest inhabitants of Dallions realm, and as such, they held a parental role. Nil was the one who caught Dallion the basics, and Harp was the one he usually went to when he sought understanding or advice. Vihrogon, in contrast, was like the cool uncle who spent most of his time adventuring.

Neither. The reason they werent particularly bothered was because theyve never seen one. Even the awakened dont often get to see a dragon. From their point of view, the village was attacked by a weird type of bird theyve never seen before. Thats why the descriptions didnt match. It just as well might have been a firebird for all they knew.

Right

As I told you, there arent many dragons in the world. In fact, there arent many magic creatures of any type in the world.

Those are magical creatures, not magic creatures. There is a subtle difference. Magical creatures are creatures with a few special abilities. Griffins, firebirds, sheep, even Gleam are magical because they have a bit of power of magic in them. Starspawn can also be regarded as magical. Magic creatures are beings that are made entirely of magic.

Like the Purple Moon?

There was a long pause.

Once again, Dallions understanding of the world shifted. If creatures of magic were still in the world they had to be incredibly powerful. If they wanted to remain hidden, they would have remained so. Dallion had little hope of finding, let alone defeating one.

Enough to create the Glass Mounts?

Dallion swallowed. The echo had just described the creation of a black hole. True, it didnt have the same characteristics as the black holes back on Earth, but it was one nonetheless. Someone had managed to kill a dragon not too long ago and a dragons shadow had been born. That was why the creature kept creating offspring and also why they, like the dragon itself, were attacking places where livestock was held; they were hungry, even if they didnt know what eating actually was.

No. Its only a shadow of its former self, in every aspect of the word. It has habits, not intelligence. The only way to make it stop is to destroy it. Not even a Moon can change that.

This was the first time Dallion heard of a Moon not being able to do something. It was only Nils opinion, of course, but it was a substantial one.

Dallion nodded. This wasnt a topic he was doing to drop so easily, but for the moment, the echo was right. He had a dragons shadow to kill.

Chapter 426: Tracking down Monsters

Is it true that youre a hunter? a boy dared to ask.

Since Dallion had started walking about, a group composed of all the village children had been following his every move. While he could appreciate their curiosity he too had lived in a small, insignificant village Dallion was starting to miss the calm of walking through the wilderness.

No, Dallion corrected as he finished stocking up his backpack. Just an apprentice, hopefully.

Why arent you a hunter? another child asked. Dad said you killed a hundred cracklings with one strike.

That made Dallion chuckle. Technically, he could have killed as many had they been there. In reality, though, he didnt look forward to using line attacks in the real world anytime soon. Unfortunately, it was probably that he might have to.

Thats because hunters must kill at least a hundred and one, he joked as he lifted the backpack.

Wow. Hunters must be really strong.

They are. They are very strong. Also, they would have been here if theyd known that the avian was a dragons shadow. If Eury had agreed to having an echo of Dallions, he would have been able to tell her exactly what was going on. Alas, the gorgon had adamantly refused any suggestion that he leave an echo behind, be it in an item.

Adjusting the backpack, Dallion did a quick check of his gear. Everything was there and in perfect condition. There were a lot of additional things he had been offered, far more than he needed or could possibly carry. Given that he had saved the village from significant damage, it was normal they should be thankful, though even Dallion didnt expect it to be to such a degree.

Dont you kids have anything to do? Banra walked over. Give the man some space.

Sounds of dissatisfaction filled the air. No child wanted to go, but at the same time, they knew better than to annoy the woman. She was going to remain in the village long after Dallion had left, and as strong as he was, he was just passing by.

Youll get a chance to talk to him once hes caught the creature, she added a clear lie that sounded plausible enough to get the children to comply. Got everything you need? she asked, once the crowd had cleared.

I got plenty. Dallion tapped the side of the backpack. I dont have space for more, if thats what youre asking.

Youre funny, the woman said. Im just here to tell you to be careful. Youve strong, Ive seen that much, but so is the crackling. And I dont think its the only problem.

Why do you say that?

Half a year ago, the whole area was the most boring place in the county. Wed cut lumber, then sell it to one of the merchants, whod then take it to the nearby towns, maybe even Nerosal itself. Then, suddenly, there was a sighting. Thats not too odd. Were close to the middle of nowhere, so we get the occasional creature to appear, though nothing like this. Until yesterday wed get five or six avians at most. They were still bloody difficult to deal with. The village had to spend quite a lot to buy sea iron arrowheads. Yesterday, though" She looked at the belltower. If you werent here, half the village would be gone.

Shifting from six to three dozen in just one wave was quite the jump. Without a doubt something had happened to create this change.

Maybe its because of me, Dallion suggested.

I thought the same yesterday. Not how, though. Even if you had somehow attracted their attention, the crackling population wasnt that large.

You think more of them had become breeders?

Maybe it was just bad timing. Maybe, in the past, the cracklings would split up between the villages in the area and not attack at once. If Im wrong, however, the countess might have to end up sending an army to deal with this.

Lets hope it doesnt come to this, Dallion said. Thanks for the warning. Ill keep an eye out.

Yeah, I expect you would. Good luck out there and may the Moons be with you.

It was a bit too late for that, but Dallion nodded and thanked her all the same.

A lot of fanfare accompanied him leaving the village. Every bodied person had gathered to see the awakened hero start his journey to destroy the creature that had been plaguing the village for months. Several people even offered to join him to help. They knew they didnt have the skills to face the cracklings, but reckoned they could carry his things to assist. The offers were well

intended, but ineffective. At present Dallion could carry more than half the village combined. With a body stat of thirty-two, he was fifteen times stronger than the average person, maybe more. Having someone else carry his backpack would be more of a hindrance than anything else, especially since normal people were noisy, slow, and needed to sleep. The only people that he could have taken along were the Banra or some of the other local awakened, but everyone agreed that was a bad idea. Someone needed to provide protection for the village while he was gone.

Ten minutes after hed returned to the wilderness, Dallion stopped and looked at the map of the area the village chief had given him. It was a lot more accurate than the general maps hed found in Nerosal, including four new settlements as well as a trading station. The empire might have stopped its expansion east and south, but merchants were always pushing the boundaries. After Nils speech on magical creatures, Dallion was starting to get an idea of why. Maybe it was cynical of him, but there was only one reason that people dealing with money would risk life and profit by venturing beyond the civilized worldpoaching.

So, hunters arent the only ones to go out there

Hunters are tools, dear boy, just like assassins. People dont have to hire an assassin to get someone killed, but it helps. Theres no saying whether or not the traveling merchant was alone in this. Or maybe he was just a local guide. Merchant organizations often acquire the services of people who are familiar with the area. In fact, that is the reason a lot of them enter that profession to begin with. It takes connections to join a trade group. Those who dont have them become the equivalent of mercenaries doing their own thing, hoping their skills or finds would earn them an invitation to where the real moneys at.

Dallion shook his head. Some things never changed regardless of what world he was in. The notion also ruined his childhood memories of Dherma, when a visit from a traveling merchant was one of the highlights of life. A distant aunt of his had ever married one, earning her relative comfort and protection from the Luor family during the not so pleasant times of the past.

Of course, its only speculation. Nobles also tend to go on hunts, which they call chases, on their own.

I thought they didnt bother with such things.

You seem to know rather a lot about nobles. Is there something you havent told me?

Dear boy, there are decades of things I havent told you. Just as there are things in your past you havent shared with anyone. We met in Nerosal. That should be enough.

The hint was clear.

Dallion glanced at the map again, then folded it away. According to what he had learned, the avian had been first seen somewhere in the forest that started a few dozen miles away. The explanation was annoyingly vague, most likely by design. Given the technological limitations of the world, finding a monster in the forest, even with his skills, was going to take a while. Well, normally it would. Dallion had a few things up his sleeve to remedy that.

For over an hour, he spent following the rough trail that passed for a road connecting villages. To his surprise, Gleam seemed quite enchanted by the experience. The shardfly hadnt seen a true forest such as this ever since she was born and would use the whip blade to float about in amazement. Given the nature of the forest, Dallion couldnt blame her. The trees were unlike anything back on

earth they were multiple times larger, almost to the point of a rainforest giant. At the same time, they didn't tend to obscure each other. It was almost as if they had reached an agreement to keep their roots and branches to themselves and shoot straight up.

One of the bigger trees was enough to rebuild every structure in Dherma twice over. Even the smaller easier to chop trees were a good haul.

People don't usually chop down trees in the middle of the forest. Well, not unless they want to make a path. Your suspicions are right, though. This particular species does tend to grow rather fast. It was long speculated that they were remnants of dryad groves, until a dryad guardian dismissed the notion in a conversation with a leading philosopher four centuries ago. As it turns out, they are just trees that grow fast.

Trees that grow fast. That didn't sound too scientific. Either way, they were going to help Dallion find the traces of the cracklings. Reaching the fork in the forest mentioned by the village chief, Dallion stopped. It was time to use his athletic skills again.

Climbing wasn't a skill he had relied on too much. Back in Nerosal, most of the buildings had been low enough for him to jump to the roof. With trees going up for several hundred feet, that wasn't an option.

Lux, Dallion said as he took out the caleidervisto. Gleam, time for some fun. I want you to get up there and tell me if there's any part of the forest that's not right.

Without any further invitation, the whip blade darted up like a sea serpent through water. On his part, Lux merely flashed, arriving at his destination in a single moment.

Amused, Dallion went to the trunk of the largest tree in the vicinity and started climbing.

I know, Dallion replied. That's why I won't be looking for rotting trees, but patches without trees whatsoever.

Oh?

Cracklings can't feed on what they can't decay. Also, I doubt a dragon could hide in this thicket. It'll need an open place to make its lair or living ground. If the merchant who spotted it had anything to do with its transformation, he most likely lied about where he saw it. However, there's a good chance he mentioned the closest landmark he could think of. So, it's pretty much a matter of combining the two.

Chapter 427: Sound Lures

Back on Earth, Dallion had seen dozens of traveling videos, each stressing the beauty of this or that vista. Some of the times they were even telling the truth. Nothing, however, had prepared him for the sight before him now. Even the awakened realms, as beautiful as they were, could compare to the real thing. If the Moons had created the world, they had pulled all the stops.

The crowds of the trees formed a sea almost up to the clouds. The green canopy extended over five hundred feet above the ground, disappearing east beyond the horizon. No wonder that the empire hadn't expanded in that direction, leaving the forest for lumber instead. Looking back, Dallion was almost able to see the village he'd set off from, positioned at the edge of the plain that continued eastwards to Nerosal and beyond. The city itself wasn't visible, although Dallion could guess its approximate location thanks to a few mountains in the distance.

Dallion never expected to be one. What he was really hoping to find was a patch deprived of forest. From his position he could see several such in the close vicinity, though none of them were large enough to hold a dragon, at least according to the size Nil had given him.

Lux?

The firebird chirped. It didnt seem to have found anything of particular interest, either. This was a case in which Dallion wished he had the ability to see through the eyes of his familiars. Things would have been much faster, then.

Technically, they were more hills than mountains, rising a puny several hundred feet above the forest line.

Why not?

They arent holes. They are the exact opposite of a hole, in fact.

Gleam thats why I said to look at things that are different. A dragon can still hide there.

Dallion watched as the whip blade split the air, making its way to the spot in question. Unlike Luxs method of travel, this took about half a minute. Meanwhile, the firebird kept jumping from empty spot to empty spot almost instantaneously. That was definitely an interesting way to check every meadow. It was as if the familiar had found a way to brute-force searching.

You found it?

I found a lot of crumbled rock patches. No idea when exactly the creature was here, but it definitely passed through at some point. Want me to fetch you?

The mountain in question was merely a few miles away. It was a huge clump of rocks dropped therepotentially the result of meteor spells or some other destructive magicpartially covered with vegetation in time. Definitely a suitable place for something large to make its lair there.

Lux was the first to arrive, of course. Filling Dallions domain with chirping, the firebird boasted finding two villages during its search, even if a fair distance away. The information was useful. Once Dallion checked out the mountain, he was going to pass through to ask about certain things. Given that the creature was an ex-dragon, there was a lot more that needed answering, for example, who was involved in its death.

Nil, whats the relation between magic creatures and cracklings?

So, if there was a dragon living here, it would have prevented any cracklings from appearing?

So would have a lot of other things. Youre grasping at straws, dear boy.

That was true, Dallion very much was doing just that. However, he couldnt suppress the feeling that the two were related. Hopefully, this hunt was going to provide some answers.

Dallion kept on walking in the direction of the mountain until the late afternoon. At that point, the path twisted north, forcing him to continue through the forest itself. The progress became much slower, mostly due to the size of his backpack. For a moment, he considered the option of jumping from tree to tree like a squirrel, but decided against it; it was going to attract too much attention for next to no benefit.

As night came, so did the local predators. They were very different from the ones in the steppes. Size was an impediment in the denseness of the forest, so most deadly creatures, as well as their prey, had to be smaller, nimbler, and faster. The first to try their luck and attack had the appearance of extremely long pole-cats, or a cross between a legged snake and a squirrel. With extremely sharp claws and teeth, they dashed between trees, often lumping from one to another, leaping down on their targets.

Catching them was elementary for Dallionhe could hear them approach over a hundred feet away, and their speed seemed outright slow. Initially, he didnt kill the attackers, but when it became clear that even the creatures, hed knocked out werent going to stop, he was forced to show in unequivocal fashion that he wasnt something to be considered food. It was the rule of the jungle, and even if they werent cracklings or any other monstrous creatures, this remained the wilderness; and in the wilderness to survive meant to be ready to kill.

Im not squeamish, I just dont find it necessary, Dallion said.

Where do you think the people from the last village got their first?

From there, no doubt. Thats not what Im here for, though.

Even so, Dallion used the experience to increase his zoology skill. At present, it was the lowest of his skills, and the only one he wasnt in a hurry to increase. Actually, passing the gate had stopped him worrying about skill increases at all. It was said that increasing his level would grant new and far stronger buffs, but there was little point in using all his energy to boost them up. Dallion had reached the level at which it was natural for him to improve items for entirely different reasons. Being able to improve forty items per day, he could reach the next cap of most of his skills in a week, however, he didnt see the point to rush, at least not until he finished this task. As Nil often said, skills were also another crutch if a person relied on them more than on strategic thinking.

By morning, there was a noticeable change in Dallions surroundingsa faint but consistent draft. Focusing, he tried using his layer vision to look between the trees as much as possible. Sadly, even so, it was impossible to see anything other than trees.

Gleam, am I close? he asked.

The whip blade flew up.

At first, Dallion thought she was exaggerating, but after a few minutes the forest began to thin. The space between trees increased, filled up by new vegetation. Soon enough, the forest changed into something closer to a rainforest back on earth, and then to a normal forest, starting to creep up the foot of a mountain. Large chunks of rock were visible sticking out of the ground in places, confirming the change.

The further Dallion went, the sparser the forest became, until it was entirely replaced by patches of grass between rocks. It was at that point that Dallion saw the first traces of crackling activity. It was easy to stop exactly where the avians had roostedthe rocks were much darker and brittle to touch.

That doesnt give me much to go by.

I can also tell you that theyve returned to the spot at least once.

How can you tell that?

Look at the zones of damage. They spread from the point of contact, forming a circle. The longer the crackling remains, the larger the circle gets.

Circles within circles. Dallion was able to see it clearly now. That meant that the creatures had remained here for a while, then left, and returned later for a short while. At the moment that gave Dallion everything he needed. Leaving his backpack and most of his gear, he then returned to the forest.

Gleam will keep an eye out.

Thats not the point

Theres no chance that the avians will come here without a reason. The only way to get them is to use bait. If any of them find my backpack appetizing enough, all the better.

Youre relying that they still have a desire to eat at all.

They were hungry enough to attack a village. And since I doubt that they have a sense of smell, sound must be whats attracting them.

Please dont tell me youre planning to capture an animal to use as bait

Youre half right. Ill catch something, but it wont be the bait.

Hunting normal creatures proved to be elementary. After spending half a year hunting dangerous and exotic beasts, this felt like a walk in the park. In less than an hour, Dallion had caught five different representatives of the local fauna, but his goal wasnt to use them as dead or living bait. Rather, all he did was use his music skills to copy the sounds they made.

Thanks to his perception level, and Harps guidance, Dallion used his harpsisword to link to the creature, then match the exact sound sequence they used to make their cry. The process required him to enter the awakened realms more than once. Achieving such a feat, at least initially, was impossible without guiding markers. Even with them, it was no easy task. Dallion not only had to pull the right strings at the right time as a harp, but he also had to deliberately force several different sounds to clash together. The closest way to describe it was to simultaneously play twenty different chords on twenty different guitars, while at the same time using just one. It required perfect perception, extreme speed, and a good grasp of music skills.

To match the cry of the first captured creature a rather large and colorful bird Dallion had to spend half a day in the awakened realms, not to mention increase his music skills three times in the process. Even then, the result was somewhat lacking.

Following Harps advice, Dallion increased his skill several more times before trying again. That time, the outcome was considerably better, allowing him to move on to the next species.

When he was done, Dallion was able to mimic the sounds of two birds, a fox-like creature with flexible ribs, something the appearance of a tapir, and the local hare variant. In the process, his music skills had reached fifty-two. And while Dallion would have preferred to be able to milk

something more appetizing, such as a cow, he returned to the spot on the mountain and started playing.

Sounds of a menagerie of creatures filled the air, far louder than any specimen could achieve. Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't have fooled anyone at all. However, as Dallion suspected from the Stars brief attempt to turn him into a chainling, cracklings didn't perceive subtle differences in the real world.

In the late afternoon, several hours before sunset, a small flock became visible in the air.

Chapter 428: Sudden Capture

Careful! Dallion shouted. I don't want you to kill them.

The fight was going so well that the results were bad. It had been over a minute since the cracklings appeared, and Dallion was yet to render one of them unconscious. Nil had assured him that it was possible, and yet the creatures would always end up bursting in a cloud of smoke.

It was ironic that Dallion often found himself wishing that the cracklings were slightly stronger. Even with him deliberately not being on the offensive, the creatures kept dying. In the past, he had always been concerned that cracklings were too numerous or too smart, or too agile to get hit. Now, he wound that it was far more difficult to defeat one without killing it.

Not helping, Dallion said through his teeth. Can't you cocoon them?

Sure. As long as I'm in an awakened realm.

Normally, Dallion would have come back with a snarky comment on the matter. This time, though, that got him thinking. It was quite true that in the awakened realm, he'd have a lot more options. Using the shield, or even his music skills to capture a creature, would be elementary. It was also true that Dallion had a way of moving things from one realm to another. The Moons prevented this, although the Star had managed to find a very specific loophole to use the Vermillion rings to get the Nerosal overseers as well as the entire city into its awakened realm. Now that Dallion had become an initiate, maybe he could do the same for a single crackling?

The notion of letting a crackling into his domain didn't fill him with enthusiasm, but if he wasn't willing to constantly venture out of his comfort zone, he was stifling his progress.

I'll keep that in mind.

Sliding on the ring, Dallion leapt at the nearest dragonlet. Once again, he split into a dozen of instances, each placing a hand on the creature's underbelly. In three of those instances, the action was too forceful, resulting in the avian's death. In the majority of the remaining, though, he came into contact without causing any harm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The rocky mountain disappeared, along with the forest around it. Instead, Dallion found himself in the sky above a tropical island.

His first thoughts were of confusion. What he'd expect was to find himself in his awakening room as usual. The fact that he hadn't sent waves of fear through his very beings. It was only after several seconds that he remembered Gen had remodeled the realm completely. Gone were the rooms, for the most part, replaced by open spaces. Considering that Dallion was in full control of the weather, that

was a logical choice. The two nymph towers had become the central point of the realm, rising in both parts of a perfectly shaped bay between Dallions island, and the chain that was Vermillion. Lush beeches extended into lovely meadows, and picturesque forests, to which all remaining linked items were connected: Vihrogons mansion, the bowls garden, Luxs observatory nest Everything had been placed with extreme care and an eye for detail. Even Nils library seemed grand.

CRACKLING PULLED IT

You have successfully brought a DRAGONLET into your realm.

All damage done to your realm will reflect on you in the real world.

You have broken through your forty-first barrier.

You are now Level 41

Choose the trait that you value the most.

This was rather unexpected. The only time that Dallion had leveled up without an actual trial was when he had unsealed his mother. At the time, he had thought that this was an exploitable abuse, until he had learned that only the first instance was worthy of a level up. This had to be similar.

Naturally, he chose to increase his perception. At the moment, that was the trait that suited him best.

The crackling appeared immediately after. Confused by the sudden change, the creature flapped about to find its bearings. That proved more than enough.

Cocoon it! Dallion ordered, throwing the armadil shield at the avian.

Freed from the limitations of the real world, the shield did just that, extending around the crackling until a solid metal sphere was formed.

That confused the creature even more. Going into a panic, it attempted to break its way out, but to no avail.

Can you handle it? Dallion asked as blue wings of blue flame emerged from his back.

So far, so good. The capture had gone without a hitch to the point it was almost climactic. Now the more complicated thing beganinterrogating a crackling.

The first step was easy. Combining his guard, music, and attack skills, Dallion managed to use sound to entangle the dragonletwhich back on Earth would have been described as partially paralyzing it. The process had taken a few more attempts than expected. It was slow and cumbersome and yet clearly unsuitable for actual combat. When dealing with an already captured enemy, however, it was more than perfect.

Alas, despite the string of nearly miraculous successes that had led Dallion to this stage, he found that it was the simplest of trivialities that kept him from going forward: his inability to understand the creature. Up to now, he had assumed that his empathy would help him. After all, it had allowed him to have conversations with items and area guardians. Unfortunately, cracklings and other Star spawn werent part of the world. The only reason Dallion was able to understand Nox and Lux was that they were his familiars; and even then, it was mostly a matter of feeling what they were saying rather than the words themselves. The dragonlet didnt even have that connection.

Dallion agreed, he should have learned writing. In fact, he would be overjoyed to learn any additional skills, but apparently it wasn't that easy. From what Nil had told him, awakened usually were granted new skills when passing a gate. By all accounts Dallion should have as well. Then again, it was he who had hassled the Moons into granting him skills that weren't offered. His forging skills, and even his spark weren't something he should have received. At the time, Dallion was under the Moons protection, even favored by one, so it wasn't a big deal. Now that he had entered into the you're-on-your-own territory, they were unlikely to grant any favors.

Harp, can you handle him? Dallion asked.

Dallion thought about it. In truth, the last thing he wanted was to have such a creature in his domain. However, it was looking as if he didn't have any other choice.

Is there a way I could learn a skill through a trial? Dallion asked.

Well, I guess I'll have to release it back into"

Dallion paused for a moment.

Dont get me wrong. Its not like doing so would cause any particular harm. The matter is that you physically cant. The ring is a powerful tool, and you have cleverly found a loophole allowing you to snatch a crackling from the world. However, the Moons wont allow you to release one back out.

What? That sounded like a bureaucratic trick.

Unless youre a Star-cultist, youre not allowed to create cracklings, you should know that. And releasing one from your realm is the same as creating one.

Dallion didn't find that fair. However, he had to admit that the Moons were good at placing safeguards. With that option gone, he had to resort to something else. If interrogation wasn't an option and releasing was impossible what else was there?

I don't suppose anyone has the writing skill?

Something told him that even if they did, they might not be allowed to use it. It still remained a mystery when guardians could help him with tasks and to what degree. He knew that echoes were supposed to, but Nilthe only external echo in his realm had flat out refused to provide anything other than tutoring.

Alright, just hold it here for a while. I have another idea, Dallion said, then exited his realm.

The first thing he remembered upon returning to the real world was that he was in the air, and without Luxs wings. Thankfully, a quick combat burst took care of that issue, helping at least one instance land safely on the ground.

Get them, Gleam, he ordered. I have what I want.

The whip blade extended, setting off on its slicing spree. Dallion was quick to join in. Now that there was no danger of anyone getting hurt, the fight was significantly easier. It also helped that the flock was a third of that which had attacked the nearby village.

One after the other, the avians were reduced to puffs of black smoke. Once they were all dealt with, Dallion picked up his backpack and rushed in the direction they had come from. Gleam, of course, was used as a scout to try and pick up the trail.

Initially, signs were easy to find. As Dallion had suspected, the dragonlets had come from another mountain relatively nearby. The upper area of its cliffs had multiple cracked rocks, indicating according to Nils method that this was a frequent stop for the creatures to flock before going elsewhere. Unfortunately, there was no indication that the avian the dragons shadow had been at the location.

From there, Lux and Gleam had gone through several more of the cluster mountains in the area, and after significant research found one other site that had darkened rocks. Unfortunately, after that the trail ran cold.

Other than some village, and a few animal hunters, no. Absolutely nothing.

Alright, get back here.

Dallion didnt like it when Gleam got snarky, but she was right. There didnt seem to be anything significant to go on. It was possible to pass through the village and ask about, but would that be helpful, though?

Gleam, in what state was the village?

That left Dallion back to square one. He had a general idea from where the avians had come, but little else. If the dragons shadow moved from one place to the other, as it likely did, finding it would be complicated.

Perfect! I want you and Onda to recreate this entire area, just make it smaller. Not too small, though. I want it to be able to fool the crackling we have.

There was a moment of silence.

You want to see where itll go? This isnt the real world. It might not react the way you think.

Its worth a try. Please do that for me, and let it go at the spot I pulled it in. Onda can help you.

In his mind, Dallion could imagine the geek nymph getting all nervous. For some reason, even after spending a while in Dallions realm, he still couldnt relax when Harp was close. One of the perils of being an eternal teenager, it seemed.

Give me a while.

The while turned out to be quite short. There was no telling how much time passed in Dallions realm, but in the real world, it was only a few seconds later that Harp let him know that everything was set. Dallion then immediately went into his realm to watch the flight of the dragonlet first hand. Of course, he had Gleam cover him with an illusion, so he appeared to be a crackling as well.

Despite Harps initial reservations, the plan worked out perfectly. Finding itself free, the creature darted through the air towards what was familiar. It flew over several mountains that Dallion already knew were perching spots, over the village, and beyond the visible cluster of mountains.

Theres no reference for that area. Besides, it doesnt matter. We found something far more interesting.

Like what?

Like why would a starving dragonlet not attack a food-rich village it flew over

Chapter 429: Outpost Village

Awakened! the guards shouted as Dallion approached the village gates.

It wasnt difficult to tell. Only an awakened could carry a backpack that size with next to no effort. Dallion expected his presence to create a lot of commotion, potentially even gather a crowd. Nothing of the sort happened.

The massive wooden gates swung aside, allowing him access to the village and nothing happened. There werent crowds of people, far less anyone of importance. It almost felt like Dallion was returning home, to no fanfare.

This was new. Dallions own guardians rarely were a topic of discussion in the past, if at all.

Welcome to the village of Canopa, a young woman, barely in her twenties, said. Im Lelandra, the village scribe here to assist you during your visit.

The role of village scribe had long lost its significance, but during the time of Dallions grandfather, it was considered key. In a lot of places, it was even regarded as second in importance, right after the mayor. For a scribe to come to the gates and at such short notice, there had to be something going on.

Dallion, envoy of Nerosal, Dal introduced himself. Is it usual for you to assist travelers in such fashion? Especially since youre an awakened as well?

Confusion filled Lelandra, ringing loudly in Dallions senses like a church bell. This wasnt an unusual occurrence. On the contrary, it was almost expected. Quickly, the confusion shifted into fear. The woman trembled, unsure whether she had displeased him in some way, yet also terrified of asking in case that made things worse.

Its my first time here, so Im not sure how things are, Dallion said, subtly adding a bit of calm in his words.

The explanation, combined with his music skill, was enough to make the woman calm down. Offering an apologetic smile, she nodded.

That is understandable. Im sure that the village chief will explain everything. She glanced in the direction of the village center. Would you accompany me, please?

Always happy to, Dallion said, adding a note of charm in his words, very much to Vihrogons encouragement.

The two made their way through wide cobble-paved roads far better maintained than some in Nerosal itself to the very center of Canopa. Along the way, Dallion noticed several library buildings, each three stories high.

The village chief's mansion resembled a town hall rather than a mansion. It was four times as big as any other building in the village and bustling with people. Several kept on giving him weird looks, but seeing Lelandra nearby quickly diverted their attention elsewhere. Dallion could tell thanks to his music skills that he had broken some unspoken rule of etiquette. Reaching the massive double doors of the building, Dallion was able to tell exactly what bothered him: the building, the library, the structure of the village itself, all had the markings of a university city.

Stopping for a moment, Dallion looked around. Now that he had grasped the situation, everything fell into place. The village was structured with mathematical precision in three main areas: dorm area, libraries, food storage area, and the village chief's mansion, which was the administrative building.

Is anything wrong? Lelandra asked.

No, nothing wrong, Dallion lied. Just admiring the view. This place seems to be run quite well.

The village chief is a perfectionist, as you'll see, the woman said with pride. I'm sure she'll be glad to explain everything in great detail.

I'm sure as well.

The inside of the building was just as intricate and bureaucratic as Dallion expected. After leaving his backpack in the assigned luggage area, he was led up several staircases, until he reached the fourth floor of the building. Moving along to the large wooden corridor, he was brought to a massive oaken door. Upon reaching it, Lelandra diligently straightened her clothes, took a deep breath, and knocked.

Scribe Lelandra here with the new awakened, she said.

There were a few moments of silence, after which the massive door swung open.

Please, the woman invited him to enter.

After you. Dallion smiled.

I'm not allowed to enter. The conversation you're to have is private. I'll be waiting for you here.

That explained that. Trying to act as casual as possible, Dallion walked in. The moment he did, the door closed behind him.

We weren't expecting a visit until next month, an old woman seated on a large couch said. While it was difficult to say with certainty, Dallion assumed she was in her sixties, even if she had the appearance of someone in their early forties. It was the eyes that gave her away, aged with experience. Possibly the long curly salt and pepper hair helped as well.

I'm surprised anyone expected me at all. Dallion made his way to an armchair closest to her.

The material felt comfortable, created without a doubt, with awakened in mind. The rest of the room was no different. Everything from the thick carpet to the shelves of leather-bound books, to the large bronze devices that decorated the room, were made by people with the appropriate skills.

Eleria Fall, the woman introduced herself. Before we start, Id just like to make one thing very clear. I dont care what youve heard. I do not need further supervision or interference. It is bad enough that I keep not getting informed of the latest changes. Ill offer you every courtesy while youre here, but I expect you to do your job discreetly and be on your way as soon as possible. Nothing personal.

Nothing personal taken. Dallion kept the smile on his face. Would it help if I said I havent heard a thing?

How kind. The womans mood soured. At this stage I think its a bit late for"

Ive no idea what this place is, Dallion interrupted. The reason I came here is because it was along the bath of an avian crackling thats been causing chaos in the area.

Youre not from the Academy? There was a brief moment of surprise. Dallion could almost feel a few other emotions, because the woman put up her guard, blocking his skill, as if shed erected a brick wall around herself. Who are you exactly?

Dallion Darude, envoy of Nerosal.

Youre Dallion? Eleria narrowed her eyes, looking him over as if he were a suiter coming to ask for her daughters hand in marriage. Responsible for the whole festival fiasco affair?

Pretty much. No matter where he went, it seemed he couldnt get rid of that perception of him. Im training to be a hunter now, which is why Im here.

Right, right. The woman leaned back. Her guard remained up, though she was noticeably less confrontational right now. Well, I guess I must apologize for the confusion. I assumed you were sent to never mind.

No problem. Mistakes happen. Dallion nodded. And Ill be on my way soon enough. I just need a bit of information on the avian.

Just information?

Its my task to deal with it.

Elerias glance hardened, as if it were of sky iron. For the first time in a very long while, Dallion felt as if he were somewhere he didnt belong. It was similar to the time he went to see the overseer. There wasnt an icy chill, but rather the oppositeDallion felt as if he were scorched by a flaming sun. The experience only lasted a second, but was enough to remind him of the difference in level between the two.

I dont know anything about an avian, the woman replied. The lie was so obvious that she was virtually acknowledging that she did. This village is dedicated to spell research. As you know, we dont meddle in the affairs of the gentile.

The mage who had warned Dallion not to interfere with the Star definitely had something else in mind. Since the woman knew about the Nerosal incident, she undoubtedly knew of that as well.

I see. Any suggestions where I should look?

Im sorry.

Im sorry too. Dallion stood up. Ill be on my"

Have you come across a lot of creatures in the wilderness? The woman suddenly changed the topic. As a hunter, I mean.

Yeah. Ive seen a fair amount.

Fascinating creatures, every single one of them. The woman raised her left hand and drew something in the air. Shapes emerged, linking together as a molecule. The entire pattern flashed a deep blue, transforming into a large blue tome. Please. The woman grabbed hold of the book before it could fall, offering it to Dallion. Since youve come all this way, I could at least give you this. Itll be useful for your future exploits.

The book was heavier than Dallion expected. A normal person would have trouble even carrying it. The only title written with silver letters on the leather cover read Bestiary.

Are you sure? Dallion hesitated. I dont want to take something too valuable.

Its a copy, Eleria replied, not refuting the fact that it was rare and likely ridiculously expensive. If that is all, I wish you success in your journey.

Thank you. And I hope things get resolved here in your favor.

It was tempting to ask some of the items for more information, but given how quiet they had been since hed entered, Dallion decided not to push his luck. With a slight bow, he left the room. As before, the door opened and closed on its own.

Consider yourself lucky, dear boy. If you didnt have a degree of notoriety, things could have been very different. The Academy doesnt like others poking in their business.

What do you think theres actually doing here?

Something thats not our business. Lets leave it at that.

I hope your conversation went well, the scribe greeted Dallion in the corridor. Which house will you be living in during your stay?

I wont be staying at all, Dallion said.

Oh? Confusion flared up within the woman.

I got what I needed, so I must be on my way. Any chance I can get something to eat before I go?

Err, of course Is there anything specific youd prefer?

Just food. Dallion went down the corridor. The visit was shorter than he imagined, but there was still a way for him to learn a thing or two. Since the people in the village were so tight-lipped, he was going to resort to those who were dying to talkthe items.

Chapter 430: Academy Influence

The conversation with the items in Canopa had provided him with quite a bit of useful information. Most of the time had been spent in Dallion answering questions about the world. The dryadssome of which had spent real-life centuries in the small villagewere fascinated by everything. All the events of Nerosal, the involvement of the Star, and even his journey to the Glass Mounts were

followed with such interest one might have thought they were long-lost secrets of the universe. In many ways, the guardians were like children, despite being ages old. It was through them that Dallion learned the true nature of the village.

Apparently, in the past Canopa used to be a real village, like many others in the area. Originally created by explorers who ventured east in search of treasures, it made a living by selling furs and fine quality lumber to merchant organizations. All that changed during the Wars of Succession. With the counties fighting amongst each other, there was little interest in small villages, especially such that didn't produce ores. As a result, the Canopa became isolated for quite some time. A few years ago, that changed when the Academy of Magic sent a small group of mages into the area to do research.

Initially, their involvement was minimal. The mages helped the village expand and took care of most underlying needs. In exchange, they built a few structures where they could focus on their research. As the months went by, more and more members of the Academy arrived. For the most part, they were apprentices who seemed to be there to study. Yet, the permanent residents would also increase. Gradually, the mages became far more numerous than the locals, at which point a new arrangement was made. The locals were given a choice: stay and take care of the livestock, or move to a town in the empire with the generous support of the Academy. To no surprise, most of the villagers preferred a better life for themselves and their families and left. Those that remained were currently pretty much acting as serfs, taking care of the food and keeping the place clean, while a mage had become the official village chief.

On a much more pragmatic aspect, the dryad guardians had shared that the local mages were fully aware of the cracklings. That was not all; one of the main purposes of the Academy's presence was to seek out and research interesting local flora and fauna found in the area. The reason the village chief had readily given Dallion a bestiary assuming it was one was because it was her property. According to one particularly chatty wooden bracelet, the village had caught several crackling specimens for study, including one less than three days ago. While there was no way of confirming it, the bracelet was adamant she had overheard it mentioned that the source of the cracklings was due northeast, where a research expedition had been.

Dallion could understand how they meant. When Veil and Gloria had done their surprise visit, he had felt quite happy, as if he were no longer alone. It must have been thousands of times more intense for banished races to experience the same. Aspan was a perfect example. Dallion could tell he longed for others like him, to the point that he made a point never to discuss the subject. On a few select occasions, he had let slip that he had had conversation with otherworlders from his original city. Sadly, they had drifted apart long before he had risen to become the leader of his race in this world.

No

A strange compliment that made Dallion smile.

With that, the discussion was over, and the bothersome trip through the forest continued. Already it had been hours since Dallion started, and he was no closer to reaching his destination. That was the annoying thing about mages; they were what Dallion was in the realms: capable of flight. The trip of the research group might as well have taken a few hours, but at Dallion's pace, days were more

likely. All he had was a rough direction and Gleam to keep a lookout in the skies. Thankfully, that proved to be enough. By nightfall, the whip blade had spotted another small flock of avians. The creatures were flying aimlessly in search of anything that would satisfy their hunger. Dallion considered capturing a few, but ultimately decided against it. He already had one prisoner in his realm.

The fight was quick and effortless. To Gleams delight, she was the one doing all the killing. Just hearing her comments made Dallion glad that he had met her the way he had. If he had come across the shardfly in the wilderness, it was more likely than not that she would have sliced him to ribbons the moment she set eyes on him.

Once the coast was clear, another performance took place in Dallions realm. Building on Gleams observations, Harp had created another copy of the real-world environment and once again released the imprisoned crackling. This time the creature proved to be more cautious, although it still went in the expected direction. By all indications, Dallion was getting closer.

As night fell, he decided to take a pause. While no rest was required, the night predators were becoming more annoying. This far east, animals werent used to seeing people as dominant, so they tended to attack even when it was obvious they'd lose. Dallion found that the best solution was for him to spend very high up in a tree, at least until he reached another of the mountains. It was at that point that he opened the tome that Eleria had given him. Of course, before that, he had scanned it with his kaleidervisto, just in case.

Words glowed on the pages in a bright green light.

The bestiary was the first proper book Dallion had seen since arriving in this world. While there had been numerous scrolls and even tomes in his ring library, their structure ranged between outright medieval to early Earth Renaissance. This started with an elaborate contents section dividing the creatures in categories and ended in a series of appendices, which included a large section of the authors and researchers who composed the book.

It was expected that the book wouldnt contain any common animals such as sheep, wolves, rabbits, and the like. However, Dallion was surprised to see that it didnt contain a crackling section either. What it did contain was an enormous selection of magic and magical creatures. Most notably, it also had dragons.

With a mere two pages per creature, Dallion had his doubts. Then again, it was too much to expect that hed be given a full encyclopedia, just like that.

According to the bestiary, there were a total of seventeen known dragons in the world, throughout all of history. Five were said to have been killed millennia ago, nine were classified as missing, and two were believed to have been spotted. It was no surprise that one of those two was suspected to be east of Wetie province.

Details were scarce, with a large part of the pages being filled with an art depiction of the creature, a miniature map depicting its suspected location, and several squares resembling QR codes, most likely meaning something to people with actual magic.

Illnesses that affect dragons?

In the wilderness, everything is possible. Thereve been cases of plagues emerging and destroying cities.

It says its name is Armalion.

Sounds made up. Probably some classification or other. You can ask it when you meet it.

It has some pretty nasty abilities.

In truth, all dragons had quite impressive abilities. From what Dallion could see, line and point attacks were a must, combined with spark attacks for good measure. The funny thing was that apart from the dragons ability to fly, the rest had nothing to do with what he imagined. Dragons in this world didnt breathe fire, norif the bestiary was to be believedattack with claws, teeth, or tail. If anything, they were more like Luxan embodiment of energy that found in quite unconventional ways. In this particular case, the dragon was closer to an illusion factory, capable of creating lifelike illusions on a scary level. Just as Gleam was able to make a dull object cut enemies, the dragon could turn a mountain into a volcano capable of burning everyone affected by the illusion. What was more, there was speculation that it could also invade the realms of its attackers with swarms of echoes. No wonder such creatures were considered dangerous. Even if these were all the abilities they had, defeating or capturing them would involve armies of awakened.

Sleep was brief and fast. Slightly over five hours later, the sun already peeked from beyond the horizon, making the start of the day. It didnt take much for Dallion to wake up. The real-life sleep had done him quite a lot of good. Slowly stretching, he stood up and looked around. Clusters of rocky mountains were visible in several directions, yet Dallion had a pretty good idea where to go. It was possible for him to send Lux to scout a bit, but being so close to the dragon shadows resting place, he preferred not to.

Strapping on his armor, Dallion leapt to the next tree. Several hours later, it was obvious he was on the right track. One of the nearby mountains stood out like a sore thumb, surrounded by a large number of fallen trees. The key element was that the trees hadnt fallen because someone had knocked them down, but they had uprooted themselves, finding the terrain too loose to hold them. And as Dallion knew, there was only one type of creature that could make rocks and soil lose their grip.

Nice to make your acquaintance, Armalion, he said out loud. Time to see what you got.