

## **Leveling up 431**

### *Chapter 431: Living Corpse*

The bestiary claimed that Armalion was a creature of vast intellect. If that had been the case, turning into a crackling must have diminished considerably. The creature had made an attempt to hide itself, which was smart, but done so in such a way that made its hiding place obvious. One look at the entire mountain was enough to show anyone that the whole thing was one hollow crust that was about to collapse on itself at any moment. Uprooted trees were everywhere, along with dark, brittle rocks. Whatever creatures had once lived here were long gone, making the area feel eerily empty. Finally, there was the massive wave of hate and anger that emanated from within the mountain, that almost gave Dallion a headache just by being near.

That was only partially true. Dallion had faced a colossus as large as a mountain back in the awakening shrine near Dherma. That was a realm, however. In real life, everything was smaller.

Darude, Dallion whispered, and thrust the hammer forward.

Half the strength in his arm suddenly vanished, as the point attack was triggered. A dot of force thrust forward, hitting the side of the small mountain. It was nowhere nearly as strong as it should have been in the real world, however, the mountain wasn't as durable either.

A crater-like indentation emerged, pressing against rock as if it were melted cheese. The point of impact was no smaller than a three-story house, and that was just the beginning. Massive cracks formed, spreading up like a rip. The sound of crackling filled the air, causing flocks of birds in the area to head for the sky. Then, all of a sudden, the entire mountain top crumbled, collapsing on itself.

His arm still partially numb, Dallion split into two dozen instances, dashing in various directions to avoid the rockslide coming from the mountain. Fortunately for him, and the surrounding forest, the rocks didn't manage to get very far, instead falling into the newly created chasm. The size was such that even Dallion hadn't imagined it, going down from the point of the ground as much as the mountain had originally risen up.

A deep darkness covered the floor of the chasm, that even sunlight couldn't reach. That was it, the shadow of the dragon. At first Dallion couldn't see any of the creature's features, no matter how much he focused. Soon enough, though, an eye emerged, opening in the front part of the dark mass.

Gleam, is what I'm seeing real? Dallion asked, staring at a sapphire eye three times larger than him.

A second eye opened. Just as large as the first, it helped Dallion imagine the outline of the dragon's head. No sooner had it done so than flocks of ravens flapped upwards, like black streams.

Without hesitation, Dallion drew his harpsichord with his left hand, then did a line attack. The effort was enough to bring him to his knees, though, thankfully, nowhere as exhausting as the experience on top of the mountain. Nil was right, this body was adapting to the pressure, and fast.

The thin thread of destruction sliced forward, transforming a large part of the cracklings into dust, and even chipping off a few rocks behind. Combat splitting into seven instances, Dallion braced

himself for a following attack, but none such happened. The dragonlets scattered throughout the sky, in small groups, none showing any interest in him.

Amusing, a deep thundering voice said, causing the very air to fibrilate. A giant head emerged from the pool of blackness, followed by a pair of wings. A different pest has arrived.

Armalion! Dallion shouted, forcing himself back up on his feet. Youve caused enough devastation and suffering to the villages in the area. Using his music skills, Dallion filled every word with reason and a desire to surrender. You do not belong in the real world.

Puny threads of music, the dragon snorted. As it did, Dallion felt all his music threads snap.

This wasnt the first time such a thing happened in battle, but it was alarming with what ease the shadow did it. From its perspective, it wasnt even a challenge, as if the creature was wiping away cobwebs.

I can see you have a spark in you, the dragon said. Is that why youre disturbing me? You want to kill me?

Youre creating chaos in the area and its spreading, Dallion replied. You shouldnt exist in this world. Maybe I can find a realm for you to"

The mage before you said the same thing. Pure, unadulterated hatred flashed within the dragons eyes. In his mind Dallion felt them turning scorching red. She was so sure dragons had no place in the world and had come to kill me. And succeeded.

No, she didnt, Dallion said.

This was a turning point. His music skills werent going to help him in this fight, but logic could. At this point there wasnt much he could do. The Moons wouldnt protect him in this fight, so he had to be inventive.

Youre not the dragon, youre only its shadow.

The dragon flapped its wings. To Dallions surprise, the wind was far less than he expected it to be. Apparently, as much as cracklings affected the world, they also didnt. They were almost like negative mass in some aspects.

I am what remains of the dragon, the creature snarled. A fight that lasted hours, bending reality itself, all for nothing. Do you know what she told me when I lay broken on the verge of defeat? That I wasnt the one she was looking for.

*Youd think theyd know what happens when a dragon is killed*

*Oh, they knew, just didnt care.*

I dont want to fight you, Dallion changed his approach. But you spawning cracklings is causing serious problems. Its only affecting a few villages for now, but if it keeps up"

Im not spawning them. The creature sounded amused. Im shedding my scales.

When Im done, Ill finally be able to fly again, the dragon continued. And find the Star Ive been hearing about.

The conversation was taking an unexpected turn. If Dallion hoped that he could avoid an actual fight, that notion was all but gone. His familiars and guardians sensed it as well, preparing themselves for the clash that would occur.

And once I do, Ill have my vengeance against that mage, even if the world is to rot beneath me.

That was Dallions cue. Focusing as much strength as he could, he performed a line attack. At such a distance, the line hit the dragon almost instantly, splitting it in two halves as it was in the air. Massive clouds of dust emerged, slowly dispersing on the ground below. Unfortunately, Dallion knew that he hadnt wonhe could still feel the dragons anger. All that his eyes had witnessed was an illusion created by the beast.

*Lux, keep in front of me!*

Dallion ordered as he split into instances, moving as far as possible from his current location. If there was a counterattack, it was going to be wide. As he did, the kaleiderfisto floated in front of his face, allowing him to look through it without using hands. The device was going to help him see the real enemy, hopefully also ignoring all other illusions.

Thanks, Dallion stopped. Already he was breathing heavily. The third line attack had taken a lot out of him, making his lungs feel as if they were on fire. However, he was still standing. The level of exhaustion was nowhere nearly as bad as he feared, but even so, he probably had one more strike in him, possibly two. He was going to have to make them count.

A wolf-like crackling emerged out of nowhere, heading directly for Dallions throat.

Dallions reaction was instant. Splitting into six instances, he blocked the attack with his hammer, then twisted and pierced the attacker with a forward thrust. No sooner had he done so, than the creature vanished, replaced by the thick trunk of a tree.

You missed one, Gleam, Dallion said, looking around with several instances.

There was something to be said about Gleams sense of humor. Fighting every tree in a forest was somewhat of an impossible task, not to mention it wouldnt get Dallion anywhere. The enemy was the dragon, not the illusion it cast.

I really need to build myself a crossbow, Dallion said, looking at the sky through his kaleidervisto. For the most part, there was nothing, until all of a sudden, the edge of a black silhouette emerged.

Dallion didnt hesitate, spinning around, then throwing his hammer at the perceived location of the dragon. If this was like any other crackling, one hit was all it would take to turn the massive being to dust.

The triangular hammer thrust through the air until it stopped, hitting an invisible barrier. There was a loud, hollow sound, accompanied by a roar.

Despite being made of sky silver, the item still wasnt fully immune. Any contact was likely to cause minor wounds.

Dallion felt a new wave of hatred sweep through him, as the hammer fell to the ground. The dragon was clearly hit, however, it hadnt disappeared. That meant only one thing: that one hit wasnt enough to defeat it. Suddenly, Dallion realized he was in deep crap.

## Chapter 432: Held by Illusion

Knowing that the dragon wouldn't die from one hit would have been nice. However, Dallion couldn't blame Nil for the lack of foresight. For that matter, he couldn't blame the bestiary, either. While it contained information about a vast number of creatures, shadows weren't on the list. The greater concern, however, was the nature of the creature itself. It was supposed to be a crackling, and yet it had survived both a line and a point attack, both infused with a spark. In one case, it could have been argued that Dallion had missed, due to the creature's mastery of illusion. In the other, though, there was no explanation.

Splitting into instances, Dallion leaned left to avoid the attack, then did an arc strike of his own. The tip of the harpissword, sliced through the humanoid enemy, transforming it into the part of a tree.

That was the annoyance when fighting illusions of such a level. Dallion was fully aware that all the shadow soldiers didn't exist, and yet at the same time they could hurt him. A few already had. The dragon had effectively transformed the entire area into a battlefield in which Dallion had to fend against dozens of enemies, with hundreds more in wait. The opponents were quite skilled and, for all practical purposes, invincible. All a direct hit did was only shatter the illusion, returning them to their original form—rocks and trees—only to be transformed back into silhouette soldiers later.

That last part was the key. According to the bestiary, Armalion—the real one—had a number of weak spots where one section of the scales ended and another began. The spots were difficult to reach, so Dallion had chosen not to target them initially, relying on a line strike to achieve victory. Clearly, there was no way around it now.

A loud flapping sound filled the air. Using an instance, Dallion turned around just in time to see a dense flock of dragonlets flying his way. It was a safe bet to say that these weren't illusions.

Standing his ground, Dallion swung his weapon, forming a figure eight. The attack immediately was followed by a series of multi-strikes, each piercing a crackling in the air. Dust swept through Dallion, as if he were in a factory chimney. If there was time for the dragon to attack, it would be now. Knowing that, Dallion quickly crouched down, holding the armadil shield in front of him. A sudden strike landed on the shield, throwing him back dozens of feet.

The trees he was flying at quickly changed form, transforming into enormous centipedes with hundreds of pincers, ready to shred him limb from limb the moment they got near. Fortunately, before he got anywhere close, the whip blade struck them all in a wide arc attack, reverting them to their original form.

*That's a lot of shedding. Any danger that he'll get to fly?*

*If so, you'd be the person with the worst timing in the history of the world*

The prospect was outright scary if true. To think there could be a creature that could manipulate reality in such fashion. This went beyond cheating—it wasn't creating something in the world, but rather convincing the world that the thing existed in the first place.

If the dragon were alive, facing it would have been utter suicide, and yet the creature had been defeated by a single mage. The thought alone sounded impossible. Then again, there was a time when Dallion was convinced that awakened could go beyond single digit levels.

Dallion glanced at the front of the shield. A spider web of hairline cracks had formed in the center and was progressively moving outwards, creating a perfect circle. Even while being made of rare metals, the shield wasn't indestructible and a crackling as powerful as this would have its effect.

The kaleidervisto stopped floating in front of his face, moving to the front of the shield. A bright blue light emerged from it, covering the affected area. It wasn't going to cause instant relief, but Dallion hoped that it would at least slow down the cracks progress.

*Gleam, can you break all of his illusions?*

*If you disperse enough dust, can you make the dragon visible?*

An idea had popped into Dallion's head.

*Sure. As long as I can find him in the first place. I can't use illusions of my own. The annoying creature sees right through them!*

Linking between objects wasn't supposed to be different from linking an object to his own realm. In theory, at least. In practice, it was a recipe for disaster, creating conflict between the items on an extremely deep level. It wasn't merely a matter of establishing the link. Even guardians that seemed in good relations could end up fighting for control of the linked realms, resulting in one of both items crumbling, like aluminum, after coming into contact with gallium.

*It's just temporary,*

Dallion assured both. Despite their calm nature, he was fully aware of how territorial guardians were. His words seemed to calm them down, mostly Gleam, who was by far the weaker entity at present.

The link formed in Dallion's realm. Thin threads of water extended from around Harp's tower to the sky-silver bridge that connected both sides of the bay. For the immediate future, what one entity did would affect the other. In that moment, Dallion felt the connection between both his items and used it to his full advantage.

The moment the sound touched the forest, the army of shadow silhouettes and the abominable bugs vanished. Like a wave passing through a sand castle, the illusions were shattered, and they weren't the only ones. The air above the crater of the mountain also gained form.

For the first time in his life, Dallion saw the majesty that was a dragon. Even in shadow form, it was enough to inspire awe in anyone who saw it. No longer was it crippled, or curled up in an abyss of its own destruction. Now, it was a creature that would rule land and sky with ease, in a pose ready for battle.

Sapphire eyes looked at Dallion, aware of what he had done, and yet for a single moment there was no hatred there, just the realization of the end.

*Just is not a word that otherworlders could be content with. You'll seek more, and for better or worse, I'll help you achieve it.*

With one brisk action, the dragon spanned its wings. And that was not all. A multitude of target markers appeared in areas of its neck and chest.

Why? Dallion asked.

Because you cracked the illusion, the creature replied. You were right. Im not a dragon, Im the shadow that was caused by his death. It was my illusion to think that I was alive, and that I had a right to be. Im nothing but a crackling with powers that have no place beneath the moon.

Dallion felt a lump in his throat. Even after all this time, he still wasnt used to this. The empath trait he had made guardians and creatures open up to him, but there was a pricehe always had to listen to what they had to say.

You were the one that cracked the illusion. Now shatter it before I drown in it again.

Dallion changed the way he was holding the harpsisword yet again. There was no point in asking if there was another way to resolve this. Doing so would only insult the once majestic creature.

Spark, Dallion said and thrust the blade forward, performing a point attack. The force emerged from the tip of his weapon, flying through the air like a lightning bolt. Focusing on one of the targeting markers created by the dragon, it pierced the creatures neck right at the point between the scales.

A loud explosion shattered the air, making Dallions ears ring. Hundreds of birds everywhere filled the skies, flying away as quickly as they could. It was done.

Feeling no strength in either of his arms, Dallion drops the weapon. He hadnt overdone it to the point of fainting, thought just by a hair. Four attacks of this nature remained his limitsomething to keep in mind for the future.

Within his realm, the link between Gleam and Harp untangled. While both the entities were pleased that they had helped him achieve victory, they were even more pleased that they were in control of their own domains once more.

Thanks, Dallion whispered.

A short distance away the massive body of the dragon had transformed into a large cloud, but instead of the usual black, it was a sapphire blue. For several seconds the cloud floated about with no intention of dispersing, when it suddenly imploded, condensing in a single point.

Things were starting to get blurry, but even in such a state he thought that he could recognize the focal point of the cloud or rather, the object it had become. He was sure he had seen it somewhere before, just

Darkness surrounded him. The moment it cleared, half a day had passed. Night had fallen, but it was a calm night. There was no lingering presence of rot or chaos, and not even any aggressive intents from the usual night predators.

A smile formed on Dallions face. With the threat over, things were back to normal. And as annoyed the shardfly was trying to present herself as, he could tell that she had been keeping watch over him all this time.

Arms still in pain, Dallion tried to stand up. All in all, he was going quite well, considering. Of course, he wouldn't be able to enter any serious, or even not so serious, fights in the next day or two. What mattered was that he could walk.

The old echo didn't answer.

*Nil? Anything the matter?*

*Look in the crater.*

*Why? What happened?*

*Just go look.*

Hesitantly, Dallion obeyed.

The light of the blue and cyan Moons lit up the area, making it almost as light as day. As such, it didn't take long for Dallion to see exactly what Nil was referring to. A few hundred feet away, at the bottom of the crater and not too far from the hammer that had been discarded in the fight, a rather large gem was clearly visible, sparkling in a magnificent sapphire light.

What's that? Dallion asked.

*That, dear boy, is a natural skill gem.*

#### Chapter 433: A New Skill

The gem felt cool to touch. Based on its size alone, Dallion could probably get a mansion in Nerosals noble neighborhood, possibly even two. That, however, paled in comparison to what he would get if anyone found out that the jewel contained an actual skill.

A natural skill gem, Dallion said.

The only time he'd seen anything of the sort was back in the realm of the Aura Sword, back when he was part of the Icepicker guild. Even back then, the skill gem was considered something exceptionally rare. What he held in his hand was five times that.

According to Nil, natural skill gems were part of a magic creature's very essence. Details remained vague, but such a gem could easily be obtained by hunting down and killing a magical creature. Apparently, the same also seemed to be true upon killing the creature's shadow.

*Before today, I'd say zero. The person who kills the creature always claims it. Even if it's something they already have, its price is unimaginable. The mage who killed the real dragon left it behind for some reason, so it remained as part of the shadow.*

To have the ability to take a skill gem and refuse to do so. As illogical as that was, it wasn't the first time Dallion had witnessed it either. Back when he had taken the zoology skill gem, he had wondered who had taken the second gem on the two-crown. The real question he should have been asking was why had the person left any gem at all.

How do I tell what skill it is? Dallion asked. Without using it.

Right. Dallion nodded. The Moons always gave a choice, just not the way people expected.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

The forest disappeared, replaced by Dallions tropical realm. The sun was just rising over the horizon, covering everything with a fine, warm light. Looking at his hand, Dallion saw he was still clutching the gem. It was even more radiant than before, glowing as if wanted to be used.

What are you? Dallion asked.

## **WRITING**

**Grants the ability to write, speak, and understand any script or language.**

**Do you wish to acquire the skill?**

A green rectangle appeared on cue. Writing skills? Quite logical, come to think of it. The dragon was masterful at using illusions, which suggested that it had a high-level Mind trait. Still, there was something about the name of the skill that rubbed Dallion the wrong way. For one thing, he imagined dragons sitting at a library reading Shakespeare.

To be honest, at this point Dallion would have been fine with either. He had to admit, though, that writing skills were a bit more useful in the present situation. For one thing, he would be able to read scrolls first-hand, including the dryad scrolls that remained in his domain largely unread. Still, it would have been nice if it had been magic

How many magic creatures have these? Dallion asked.

*In theory, all of them. In practice, only the powerful ones. Dragons, as you would expect, are considered quite powerful. Of course, as youve seen, claiming one is often more difficult than its worth.*

No arguments there. If the dragon hadnt been a shadowand in good dispositionDallion wouldnt have stood a chance against it. That only further made him aware of the power that magic granted in the world. The only mage he had seen in personexcluding those of the nearby villagewas given the task of protecting a member of the imperial family, and another had managed to kill a dragon.

What about magic? Dallion asked. Is there any way to get such a skill?

That was the answer Dallion pretty much expected. Reaching out, he pressed the small green rectangle that confirmed his choice of skill.

**WRITING skills obtained.**

**MIND trait increased by +1**

**You now have the ability to write, speak, and understand any script or language.**

A Mind increase as well? Dallion asked.

At this point, every train increase was good to have. Dallion was seriously considering going achievement hunting again at the first opportunity. Now that his level cap had been doubled, he felt the value of his skills and traits were so low. Given the things in store of his life as a hunter, he was going to have to boost them quite a bit.



Congrats! Gen walked up to Dallion and gave him a pat on the shoulder. This is big.

Yeah, I guess

Not getting it as usual. The echo shook his head. Why am I not surprised?

Not getting"

You pass your hunter trial, Gen interrupted. And you learned writing doing so!

Spoken out loud, the compliment didnt have the effect one would hope, but Dallion got the point. This was a major achievement. At the same time, he also had to admit, that was just the first step. No doubt, Eury hadnt expected she was sending him to fight a dragons shadow. If she had, she might have come along as well or taken other precautions. Even so, this was a task that he was expected to achieve. Everyone in the hunter party had gone through the same to get their apprentice medallion. This meant that once he joined them on the next mission, the kid gloves were off. Hed still remain the rookie, though not a packrat that would deal with nuisance threats or sneak into nests.

You know what this calls for, right? the echo asked.

Dallions first reaction was to suggest getting drunk. However, not only was that a bad idea, but absolutely impossible. There was no way to create food or drink in a personal realm; rather, any created in such fashion didnt have taste or substance.

Time to party.

Im not in the mood, Gen, Dallion said.

I know your thoughts, remember? Besides, time wont pass on the outside. Its been a while since everyone got together for a laugh. Let loose for a change.

As much as Dallion wanted to claim that it was a difficult decision, in fact, it wasnt. This was the moment hed been hoping for long before Eury had sent him out to kill the avian, even before his trip to Halburn. The day Dallion had left his guild to live with the gorgon, he had hoped hed get a chance to become a hunter, and how that dream was all that much closer. Naturally, this was only the first step. His official training would have to start, after which he was going to face the real hunter trialsomething that no one liked to talk about. Still, being an apprentice hunter meant he had a valid chance.

Fine, Dallion said. Just a bit, though.

You got it.

As everyone expected, the bit continued late into the night. Everyone gathered at the central beach of Dallions domain, to spend a fun time, and to Dallions surprise they were a lot more the partying crowd than Dallion remembered. Gleam was the center of the show. Using her illusions, she transformed from person to person, much to Julys amusement. And that was not all. The young echo, usually quiet and keeping to himself, had someone else his age to chat with, even if Onda could be a bit too much at times.

Vihrogon was there in a slightly scandalous outfit, this time also accompanied by the guardian of the bowl. Even Nil had come out of his library, sitting on a rocking chair on the beach with Nox snoozing on his lap.

They have changed a lot, havent they? a combination of sounds asked.

Dallion glanced over his shoulder. Harp approached, standing next to him. She was right, of course. Less than a year ago, the only being in his realm was Nox. Back when the crackling cub was small and full of energy, constantly eager to fight and claw. Then, Nil had joined in and Harp. Vihrogon had taken a while to be linked. Lux had been easier, and Gen, then Gleam and July. One couldnt forget the Vermilion, of course. Despite Dallions initial concerns, the island snake had been quite calm, only stirring as a result of the shardflys pestering. Finally, Onda and the bowl guardian had become part of the realm as well in less than a month.

You have as well, the dryad continued.

Im just the same good I was when I first got here. Dallion looked at the horizon. The same confused, nave goof.

Thats not a bad thing.

Wheres the avian? Dallion asked all of a sudden.

Disappeared the moment you destroyed the shadow.

So, it was an illusion after all

It could have been just a crackling lined to the shadow somehow. At this point, well never know.

That was true. At this point, all was guesswork.

Do you think hell appear here? The dragon, I mean. It would be interesting to have him as a familiar.

I dont know, the dryad replied. However, you need more echoes. There arent enough of us to guard your realm against a serious attack. And the ones you have are several ranks lower.

It was funny that she would say that. Dallion was thinking the same thing. Both Gen and July had been created when his awakening level was much lower. Unlike him, they werent capable of improving, forever stuck with their present skills. If Dallion were to create an initiate, he would have to do it now. However, he strongly preferred not to. Creating a simple echo was nothing special like a poor photocopy given life. Dallion preferred to convince a flaw to transform and remain in his realm. For that, though, hed need another trial with an appropriate enemy.

Soon, he replied. For now, lets enjoy the moment. Its a long trip back to Nerosal.

The dryad nodded.

At nightfall, Lux and Gleam filled the sky with fireworks, as bright and intricate as neon paintings. For hours they would keep creating more and more elaborate designs to everyones cheers until Dallion could no longer keep his eyes open.

Finding a good spot in his realm, he curled up and got some well-deserved sleep. A split second later, he was back in the real world, getting on his way. Sadly for the bowl, he didnt stop at the mages village, moving on through the forest until he reached the plains. There, he passed by the place that had taken him in briefly.

It wasnt a long visit. Exchanging some words at the front gate, Dallion only went in for long enough to tell the village chief that he had dealt with the dragon, then was on his way. He didnt

accept the chiefs offer of hospitality, nor did he take any of the gifts the villagers had prepared for him. After all, he had gotten plenty of rewards. Even now, he was on his way towards the greatest reward of all.

#### Chapter 434: Return to Nerosal

The way back to Nerosal seemed much slower. Possibly because he was eager to tell Eury the news, Dallion felt like it took him three times as long. Skipping the mages village, he left the forest, only briefly stopping at Vadle to tell the people there he had dealt with the crackling problem. There was much gratitude and disappointment, and quite a few attempts to get him to spend even a single night there. Alas for the villagers, Dallion declined and moved on. There was nothing for him in this part of the world.

The closer he got to Nerosal, the more energetic he felt. Even so, Nil was there to serve as a constant reminder for Dallion not to become careless. The victory against a dragon shade, as impressive as it was, didnt mean he could bring his guard down while in the wilderness. On several occasions, Dallion felt the presence of wilderness beasts, though none of them dared attack him.

Twice Dallion considered leveling up, and twice he decided not to, since he didnt wish to delay his arrival to Nerosal. Given the difficulty of the last trial, there was little doubt that the next ones would leave him exhausted and starving. Instead, he used his combat splitting to read through the bestiary while walking.

As it turned out, every magical creature had the potential to release a skill gem; or more precisely, the magic energy that created the being had no choice but to crystalize during the implosion of the creatures death and create one. The nature of the skill itself was always linked to the trait it was linked to. Since the dragon shadow had an extremely potent perception trait, the skill gem happened to grant writing. The trick was that there wasnt certainty what the skill would end up being. Some traits had a higher chance than others. The Mind trait, for example, predominantly favored writing skills, while Perceptionart skills. Empathy and Magic were notably absent. According to the armadil shield, that had been due to overhunting even back in the days of dryad world dominance. The scarcity had led to the artificial creation of skills gems to be used on the two-crowns.

Another interesting thing that Dallion discovered while reading the pages of the bestiary was the way his writing skills functioned. To be more precise, he noticed that the QR-codes that he believed to be decorations were, in fact, the local equivalent of QR-codes. The element represented a cube of text written at extreme density via magic. Deciphering it was well beyond his ability, even if the combination of writing skills and layer focus perception allowed him to see everything that was written.

At one point, Dallion attempted to tackle the issue in his realm, though to little success. He quickly then moved to try reading the dryad scrolls in his realm, but found the same difficulties. What the writing skill did was present an unfamiliar language as something like a cross between a graphics puzzle and a math equation, all displayed in copper markers. Dallion could easily see elements that repeated, and even the logic of in a few cases, yet he still had no idea what that meant. Nil had explained that the markers represented the link between the visual representation of a concept and the concept inside a persons mind. That was the reason why learning a different language was so difficult: it wasnt merely a case of remembering a new set of words, but also the formulas behind them that allowed the language to function. In short, Dallion was still going to need a teacher.

An interesting point was that markers were also displayed when a foreign language was spoken. Vihrogon was more than happy to illustrate the process by speaking in dryad. He even offered to teach Dallion the language, which was readily accepted.

Even more interestingly, Dallion found that the writing skill gave him one more majoreven if not immediateadvantage: thanks to his zoology skills, markers also seemed to appear when Lux was chirping around. And that was not all. With the firebird being his familiar, Dallion managed to achieve in a matter of true hours what others had attempted for centuries without success: the ability to talk to cracklings.

## **CRACKLING TALKER**

**(+5 Empathy, +5 Mind)**

**You are one of a hundred ever able to learn the crackling language. Just be careful that this knowledge doesnt lead you astray.**

The achievement had been very welcome, just as was the slight increase in Dallions zoology skills. The realization that thanks to the combination of his current skills he could learn to understand and speak to any creature and animal in the world, though, was mind-boggling. There was no question, in the world of awakened there were no poor skills, it was all about how one used them, and more importantly, how they combined with one another.

Learning that his owner understood everything he said verbatim, had made the otherwise energetic creature even more hyperactive. Everyone in Dallions realm had noticed that, but chose not to make a fuss about it due to Luxs lovable character.

The firebird chirped sadly, then returned to its domain within the awakened realm.

Dallion took the bestiary from his backpack, then split into two instances. He still lacked the endurance to maintain combat splitting more than a few seconds, but that was enough to read a sentence or two while still walking.

After doing a general skim of the entire tome, the thing he was most interested in were the dragons; more specifically, the dragonlet he was supposed to save. Given the way that the Academyor certain mages within ithad just killed a dragon for no clear reason, it was understandable that the Green Moon wanted one protected. How would Dallion go about finding one, though? Precious little was mentioned about dragons mating habits. Neither Harp, not any of the dryad guardians in Dallions domain knew anything either. There was a chance that Aspan could shed some light on the topic, though Dallion doubted it. The more Dallion thought about it, the more it was looking as if hed have to get it from the dragons mouth. Now, after the death of Armalion, there was only one remaining, believed to be on the northeast coast of the empire. From what was written, the creature was referred to as Cradar and was a sea dragon.

*A debt to a Moon is not an easy thing to pay off. Its good that youre eager to settle it, but its not the time.*

Ending his combat splitting, Dallion returned the tome to his backpack. The echo was right. This wasnt the time, but soon it would have to be.

Several hours later, the city of Nerosal became visible in the distance. As if to remind him, Dallion felt his traveling emblem grow slightly cold. A few steps later, Dallion felt the influence of the domain.

It was incredible how much the area had grown due to a simple level up. Of course, level ups of a city were in a league of their own. Dallion didnt know all the details about area improvement, but he did know that each time a settlement increased in level, the radius of its domain increased in size. That was also the reason cities and capitals were as big as they were, while being nowhere as densely populated as the cities on Earth. In time, though, all the newly acquired space would be filled up and a new wall erected close to the border. Builders were erecting watch towers a fair distance away even now the first structures that would eventually become part of the new wall.

From everything Dallion had seen, change in this world was slow to start, but once it did, it moved at a lightning pace.

The gate Dallion went to was open at that time of the day. To his surprise, the guards positioned there werent the ones Dallion expected, but the countess troops.

Reason for entry? a large man, twice Dallions age asked.

I live here, Dallion explained. He could feel that there was no malice in the guard. This never happened in the past, though. Even before Dallion had gained his fame, the city guards had barely made a fuss, relying on the overseer to intervene if anything went wrong. Im awakened.

The guard looked at him closely, as if trying to determine whether he was some local noble or not. Given that Dallions awakened level was in the forties, that put him at the same level as nobles relations.

Im back from doing a job for the overseer, he added, seeing that the guard was having a hard time. Dallion Darude.

Darude? The guard blinked. The tournament champion?

*I know, Lux. Thanks.*

The conversation must have gone well, for in a few seconds the guard gestured for Dallion to enter.

*Isnt that normal with the countess moving here and such?*

*The last time there were soldiers at the gates was during the wars of succession*

The statement had a chilling effect. Apparently, things were moving faster than expected. The tragic death of the imperial guest during the festival had not been forgotten, it seemed.

The streets were busy, as always, filled with people doing their daily business. Unsurprisingly, Dallion was greeted by a wave of guardians as he passed by. All of them were glad to see him and exchange a few words. Quite a number of items attempted as well.

*After you see your girl, I meant.*

*Dont worry, Ill get to it. There are a few things Id like to have you make.*

*Sweet! Something out of sky silver? Not that I cant do other metals, but theyre really boring.*

It was no surprise that Eury wasnt in her workshop when Dallion got there. None of the guardians had any idea where she had gone, likely because she kept her blocking ring on. A few city guards,

on the other hand, were able to assist. What was more, they not only told him exactly where the gorgon was, but escorted him there. After all, the overseer was also eager to hear his report.

#### Chapter 435: Bittersweet Success

Despite the city becoming the second capital, the overseers house remained the same. It was as if she deliberately kept it in such a miserable state to reduce the number of people who would visit her. Whether that was the case, Dallion couldnt tell.

Theyre waiting for you, the captain on the first floor said, looking up from his scroll.

Based on what his items told Dallion, their owners level was slightly higher, though the difference in abilities wasnt that much greater.

Thanks. Made his way up the stairs. In the past, he would have asked whether there was anything to worry about. Given his close relations to both the overseer and the gorgon, he had nothing to worry about, especially since he was bringing good news.

Reaching the door, he knocked twice, then after a sufficient pause, opened it and stepped inside. The room was as dark as he remembered it. Thankfully, this time his perception level allowed him to make out everything better.

Dallion, the overseer said, sitting at her usual table. I was beginning to think you wouldnt come this week.

Across her, several snakes on the gorgons head turned in Dallions direction. Even without her ludicrous perception level, Eury was able to see quite well in darkness.

Sorry, it was a bit more difficult than I expected. Dallion made his way to the table. As he did, Eury shifted slightly to the side, creating enough space for him to sit next to her, which he did. Were you expecting me?

Several of the gorgons snakes twitched at the question.

Euryale has been giving her report every day for a week now, the overseer said.

The cults presence has almost vanished from the city, but there are still things happening that they shouldnt. The mirror pool and a few other players have been a bit too quiet, and yet dealings have continued just as before, despite the countess presence.

Dallion didnt have anything to add. He knew perfectly well what the general was going. It wouldnt be a surprise if others were involved. Despite his notoriety, the general wasnt the only player in Nerosal, although sometimes he seemed to be.

How did your hunt go? the overseer suddenly changed the topic.

Not as easy as expected, Dallion said. It wasnt an avian that was causing the problem. It was a dragons shadow.

Sounds of surprise and alarm filled the room, tingling in Dallions ears thanks to his music skills. Both were alarmed at his statement, though Euryale was outright frightened. Considering her opinion of his combat skills, it was normal that she would be worried, but there seemed to be more there. The fear wasnt only related to him, it was as if she were worried about something far greater.

Which dragon? the overseer asked.

Armalion. He was killed by some mage who just moved on.

The Academy likes to meddle with things almost as much as the Order, the overseer said in a pensive tone. Though what interest can they hold in the Priscord?

The county borders the unexplored on two sides, Eury spoke for the first time. East and south.

Thats true. Have you gotten any tasks in those directions?

The gorgon shook her head. There was a long moment of silence. Even with the little Dallion knew about world politics, he was aware what a minefield the topic was. The Academy was considered one of the three great powers in the empire, if not the world itself. As often as they were referred to, though, little was actually known. They were powerful, they served the empire, though how and why remained unclear.

Anything else? The overseer turned towards Dallion. He could feel her eyes even behind the thick cloth that covered her entire face.

There was a village of mages in the area, he said after some hesitation. They were doing research of some kind. They didnt tell me what exactly.

To his surprise, the overseer didnt seem bothered by the fact. It was almost as if she has seen it all before.

Best keep that to yourself. Other than that, well done. Had I known the creature you were facing, the reward would have been larger. Unfortunately, its the countess that determines the reward, so

She leaned forward, placing a large metal coin on the table. The coin was five ounces, made of a pure sky silver. In the past, Dallion wouldnt have considered it much, but after finding how hard it was to scrape enough for his hammer head and his future emblem, he knew better.

Consider it a taste of things to come.

As the overseer said that, though, Dallion felt sadness coming from Eury. The gorgon was remarkably quiet, to the point one could almost say that she had been threatened not to talk. There was not a single trace of fear, however.

I wont be needing you for a while, the overseer addressed the gorgon. Youll receive your payment in a few days.

Ill pick it up later, along with the rest. Eury stood up, marking that the meeting was over. As she did, Dallion felt compelled to do the same.

The way things are going, its better that you collect everything youre owed sooner rather than later. Even the countess might not be able to hold on to it forever.

Dallion looked at the overseer, unsure whether hed be asked to remain. In the end, he wasnt, so followed Eury outside of the darkness. The captain on guard glanced up as the pair emerged. Acknowledging their presence, he did a quick gesture that could potentially pass as a salute, then went back to reading his scroll.

The moment she stepped outside the house, a burst of emotions exploded from Euryale. Everything that she had bottled up during the meeting was now free. There was relief, joy, sadness, fear, and more than a little bit of passion. Like parts of a melody, the emotions waxed and waned, telling a story, telling Dallion everything she wanted to say.

You're not wearing your ring, Dallion whispered as they walked along the street.

I know, the gorgon whispered back.

Come to think of it, Dallion wasn't asked to put on a blocker upon entering the overseer's house, either. Before he could ask if there was a reason behind it, Eury took hold of his hand. There was a clear feeling of something metal between their palms. Dallion didn't need to guess what he had just received.

How does it feel? the gorgon asked.

Being a hunter? Dallion tried to play it down. Normal.

I felt anticlimactic when I got my apprentice emblem. All that training for such a simple task. My teacher found it amusing.

After a few more steps, Eury let go of Dallion, leaving him to admire the much treasured emblem. It was a lot smaller than he imagined, though definitely distinct from any other emblems he had seen. While normal emblem travelers, Orders, or even belonging to a guild were round, this one was spiked, almost like a snowflake with five of its sides partially broken off. It was made of fire bronze, one of the less valuable awakened metals, though quite rare in Nerosal.

This was it! This was the recognition that Dallion had worked so hard to achieve. Holding his breath, he took off the chain with his traveler's emblem and replaced it with this.

Keep your old emblem, Eury advised. It's always nice to walk about when you're not on the job.

I thought hunters didn't rest.

Occasionally we do, and it's better to be able to do so in peace.

Understanding what she meant, Dallion put the old emblem in one of his belt pouches.

So, how about a feast? he asked. All that time in the wilderness had built up his appetite. I know the perfect place to"

Going to Hannah's isn't a good idea, Eury cut him short.

*Oh*

, Dallion thought. This didn't sound good.

Another fight?

No, the gorgon said. This time it has nothing to do with me. Jiroh's returned and she's found what she was looking for.

After everything experienced in the last few weeks, Dallion didn't think there could be anything capable of surprising him to such an extent. He was wrong. He had almost forgotten about the fury. The mere notion was absurd, given that she was the reason he had rushed to gain his apprentice



status. The entire point was to have the skill and the emblem so he could be prepared for the trip to the cloud citadel.

Shes leaving the inn for good, Eury added. And she also disbanded the hunter party. After this trip, the hunters of Nerosal wont be a thing.

The revelation came as a shock. The Nerosal group was the only one this far south in the empire. Most would go north to the more prosperous provinces, where pray was abundant, making the local group something of an oddity. That didnt mean they were any less valued. With the exception of Dallion, each and every one of them was an initiate and a full hunter. Not only that, but both Eury and Jiroh were otherworlders.

Hey, whats with that expression? Eury smiled, but Dallion could feel her sadness. Things were drifting apart either way. Jiroh had lost the will to lead, and Largo was itching to have his turn. It was bound to happen.

Did she really find what she was looking for? he asked.

She seems to think so. Whatever happens, shes made up her mind. Shes leaving the city, no matter what.

Leaving the city, maybe leaving the world. Dallions cheer and enthusiasm of moments ago had evaporated completely. Hed always known this would happen, or at the very least suspected, but now that it had, it felt so unreal. As much as he tried to trick his mind into thinking that she was just going on a long journey home, part of him couldnt accept it. Jiroh wasnt going on a journey, she wasnt even dying, she was vanishing from reality itself. As far as Dallion knew, he might not even remember her the moment she stepped out of this world. Maybe no one would. The scary part was he couldnt decide whether that was going to be better or not.

Hannahs taking it hard. Jiroh and I were the first souls she saved Eury went on.

*And unlike you, she stayed behind, helping the innkeeper, despite everything she was going through.*

We can feast, just not there.

Okay. Just give me a moment to wash.

Time seemed to come to a crawl. Everyone in Dallions domain felt it too, for they remained silent. No matter what he tried, Dallion couldnt get rid of the gloom that stuck to him like mist. It wasnt heart wrenching, nor agonizingly painful, just always there, as if Dallion was always in an empty room, imagining past times.

How was Eury able to handle all that so easily? The sadness coming from her had vanished the moment they had entered the workshop. It was almost as if she had put all the emotions behind her, only briefly letting them slip when Dallion had asked.

*Take it one day at a time, dear boy. In time, itll pass and things will be as before.*

*Cold, Nil.*

*Practical. Jiroh wasnt the first to seek a way back to her home, she wont be the last. Everyone else needs to find a purpose for the time spent here and stick to it.*

Chapter 436: Half the Debt

Dal, Jiroh smiled as he approached. Looking at her one couldnt tell that anything out of the ordinary had happened. The dark-skinned fury was sitting calmly on one of the rocks in the Stone Garden.

The barely noticeable faint green glow of the rocks reminded Dallion of the time he had repaired and improved the area. Technically, it was lady Marigold who had done that. Dallion, along with Vend, veil, and Gloria, had only been hired to kill all the cracklings and weaken the area guardian to the point that a single hit would be enough to defeat it.

Those were different times. Dallion was so nave to think that he could measure himself to a noble. Lady Marigold had the strength to do everything he and his group had achieved in a fraction of the time with next to no effort. The reason she didnt was because nobles were above such things. At the time Dallion thought that to be arrogant snobbishness, but in truth that wasnt the case. Nearly all the hunters he knew were good people, and yet with a very few exceptions, they wouldnt resort to mending or fixing items. Eury was the one who usually did that, although technically each of the rest had the adequate skills. In the end, a person could only focus on so many things the higher the level, the more lesser activities were ignored.

You got your emblem, Jiroh said as he came closer. Looks good on you.

Yeah thanks. Dallion looked around for a good place to sit, then sat beside the fury. Eury, on the other hand, chose to remain standing. I heard that youre he paused. What was the right way to phrase this? leaving us?

He expected the question to sadden her, but it did the opposite. The fury smiled, radiating joy with an intensity he had never felt before.

I found it. I found my way home.

At that moment Dallion couldnt think of anything more impactful than those five words. He could feel it in Jirohs very being the sensation of finding a life believed lost. And as sad as he felt about losing her, he also couldnt blame her for it.

This isnt the first time youve said this. Eury brought some cold reality back to the scene. We only know that its a cloud citadel. Theres no guarantee it hasnt sunken.

They dont sink. Besides, I know. The scrolls werent the only things the dwarf sold off. The merchant had a few other pieces.

You bought them? The gorgon sighed.

I didnt have to. I just needed to see them, which I got to do for free. There was a crest on one of them, a crest my local half remembers.

Doesnt prove anything. Its just a crest. I dont want you to get your hopes up like last time.

I know, and Im not. But I think that this time its it.

Dallion could sense emotions filling the air, both conflicting in unison. Jiroh was determined in seeing this as a way out and viewing it as hope, while Euryale was viewing it with caution.

I got a new skill, Dallion said in his attempt to change the topic somewhat. It had an effect, for Jiroh turned towards him. Writing.

You didnt mention that before, Eury noted.

I am now. Dallion didnt want to say that he preferred not to mention anything in front of the overseer. As close as she was to him, the citys guardian had shown that she was more loose with other peoples secrets than Dallion would like.

The skill was definitely going to be useful, sadly not during this trip. It would take Dallion a bit longer to develop his skill to the point that he could adequately use it. With luck, and a lot of help from Harp and Onda, Dallion might be able to learn nymph by the time they reached their location. However, it was impossible for him to learn fury.

Have you gotten enough sleep? Jiroh asked.

Ive gotten enough, Dallion lied. When are we heading out?

Theres no rush. Get some sleep. Well leave two hours before dawn.

This wasnt ideal. Dallion was hoping hed have some time to rest and train before going out again. Normally, hed ask, but given the lengths Jiroh had gone to break all ties, it was unlikely shed agree. Most likely, the delay was in order for her and Eury to go get the rest of the team.

Get some rest, Eury urged. Ill take care of the rest.

Are you sure? Dallion was getting the distinct feeling that now that Jiroh had broken the news, they were trying to get rid of him. He could feel both hiding a secret, something that they feared he wouldnt like hearing.

Yeah. Just go.

Reluctantly, Dallion did. With a wave, he left the garden, making his way back to another part of the city. However, it wasnt the Eurys place that he was headed, but the generals club. Despite everything he had achieved, Dallion had a promise to keep, and the Moon vow made sure he couldnt walk away from the understanding.

As usual, Dallion was greeted by a fury upon entering and immediately led to the generals private chamber. There, the man in question was already waiting. Looking at him, Dallion wondered whether the general ever actually lived in his proper house. This time, however, there was someone else there as well.

Ah, Dallion. The general made him a side to approach and take a seat across the desk. Capital timing. Theres someone I want you to meet.

The someone turned out to be a woman with dark ebony skins and golden tattoos. There was an indication that she was an awakened, although Dallion couldnt be sure what her general rank was. If he had to venture a guess, it seemed like she was a double digit, though not a seer yet. The tattoos were far more interesting, created with extreme skill and precision. At almost, seemed as if someone had placed metal fragments within her skin.

This is Nale Vanika, one of the best crafters the provincial capital has ever seen, the general introduced her.

Dallion nodded politely. The woman responded in turn. While Dallion couldnt sense any emotions within her, he had the distinct impression that she didnt like the general much, either.

You could say that Nale is one of my oldest clients. Quite a fruitful and mutually beneficial relationship, even if we no longer see each other as often as we should. Nale knows what it takes to get a job done and has the even more valuable virtue of knowing when to keep her mouth shut.

That was a warning if Dallion had ever heard one. The only question was whom it was directed to.

If you have other business, I can return at some other time, Dallion said.

Nonsense. Nale was just leaving.

Taking the hint, the woman stood up. There was no sign of anger or disappointment, just general annoyance. Without a word she turned around and left the room, all the time escorted by one of the general's bodyguards.

Dallion waited for the door to close shut.

Anything I should be worried about? he asked.

Nothing that concerns you, but your timing could have been a bit better. The man poured an orange liquid into the cup in front of him, then took a sip. I was on the verge of a deal that would shape up the entire province, possibly even the empire itself.

Im sure she'll be back.

Oh, most definitely. There's too much that she wants. The faint smile on the general's face sent chills down Dallion's spine. It was obvious that the man had something on Nale. Maybe it wasn't a vow like Dallion's, but he had managed to obtain another useful asset in the Archduke's capital itself. Anyway, back to you. I hear that you're finally a hunter now. The note of jealousy in his voice was unmistakable. I guess congratulations are in order.

You hear things fast.

Connections can be a very useful thing. It also helps that I'm associated with the saving of Nerosal. Did I mention that the countess herself invited me to an event in her palace recently? It wasn't anything grand, and I didn't even get to talk to the old girl, but the fact that I was invited at all is quite the development.

I'm glad. Dallion glanced over the general's shoulder, where there was a new cage, holding what seemed to be an orange firebird chick. I don't suppose you'd like to thank me by canceling my debt?

Soft laughter filled the room. Everyone knew that the general wasn't in the least amused, but was putting up a show of his way of reminding people that they remained in his grip.

No, he said at last. However, it has earned you a rather interesting bonus. He snapped his fingers.

There was a blur in the room, as one of the general's bodyguards went to a distant part of the room and returned with two items. Thanks to Dallion's current perception level, he was able to see exactly what the general did and where he took the items from. Following the display of strength, there were two items on the desk: a small cube of aether crystal and a rather unassuming dagger.

Sea iron? Dallion asked. Should I be impressed how cheap my work is?

This is a thread splitter.

The general pulled the dagger out of its sheath. The blade was extremely thin, composed of the same material, however there seemed to be a faint aura surrounding it. Focusing on the edge,

Dallion saw that the apparent glow was no glow at all, but the blade itself sharpened to an almost molecular level.

Suddenly, Dalion felt a powerful sense of range and bloodlust fill his realm. Even more surprising, it was emanating from none other than Harp.

Exorbitantly expensive, and even more difficult to find, its said to be so dangerous that even awakened that arent not seers run the risk of slicing their fingers off during use, the general continued. Naturally, thats hyperbole. The slicing off part. You see, it can easily cut through your skin if youre not careful, but it will have great difficulties going through bone unless extreme force is exerted.

It was created for one thing and one thing alongto slice through clouds. Supposedly during the times of fury power, there were awakened whose sole role in battle was to slice their way to a cloud citys heart and kill the creature that maintained it. A rather horrific practice, if historical records are to be believed, causing the entire cloud to turn crimson red before fading away into nothingness.

The mental image caused Dallions heart to tighten to the point he could barely breathe. So thats what was meant by threat splitterhe ability to slice through molecules. Dallion was being offered a scalpel.

Not to worry, though. The general put the weapon back in its sheath. Youre not going to kill the creature. Just get its heart and put it in this. He tapped on the aether crystal. The people I bought this from have assured me that its pre-set so that it would only capture a cloud entity. All you need to do is cut it out and place it in here. And dont worry, Im not pickyany heart will do, as long as it belongs to a cloud entity.

The general pushed the items forward.

Will it hurt? he asked.

Theres no way to know. Maybe itll just sting a bit.

And if the knife breaks?

No need to worry about that. The general leaned back. Its indestructible. And dont worry about returning it. Think of it as a gift. You can do whatever you want with it. Melt it down for all I care. I just want the heart.

Chapter 437: Internal Conflict

Dallion didnt respond. He had been laying in bed for the last few hours, and yet he couldnt sleep a wink. Just thinking about this trip caused him physical pain. This was the last trip the hunters would have. It would see Jirohs departureto her own world or a distant part of this oneas well as the destruction of a cloud citadel at the hands of Dallion himself.

Banishing the thought from his mind, Dallion turned to the other side of the bed. This was one time he was grateful that Eury wasnt here to see him. No doubt she had issues of her own to deal with.

The idea wasnt bad. It was definitely going to get Dallions mind off things, and who knows, maybe Nil was right about the rest as well?

Laying on his back, Dallion closed his eyes.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Bright sunlight poured down, making Dallion shield his eyes. If nothing else, the atmosphere here was much better than Neorsal. Sitting on the stone bench in the middle of his henge he stared at the portraits of skills that decorated the slabs of white stone. There were quite a lot of themseveral dozen distributed among eight stone constructs, each representing a set of skills. In the center of it all, the blue rectangle had become similar to a holographic beacon, displaying his awakened level, along with all trait and skill values.

Thanks, a voice said nearby. Im quite pleased with the result, myself. Gen approached and took a seat next to Dallion.

Still poking in my head?

I dont have a choice. Not that I want to. Its been getting dark in there. He tapped the side of Dallions head. Nils right, though. A quick level up is the way to go.

It wont be quick.

Thinking about it, this was the first time Dallion would go through a trial since the transformation of his realm. He was just about to ask Gen where it was supposed to take place, when he rememberedhe was the one creating the realm. If that were so, a trial could occur anywhere he wished.

Dal! Lux popped into existence a few feet in the air. Want me to fly you anywhere? Im really good at it! Very fast too! Faster than sis even.

Its fine. Dallion stood up. Ill walk.

Sure. But Im really fast! The firebird would constantly change location, poofing from one place to another. The flat-out rejection had clearly done nothing to diminish his enthusiasm. Ultimately, Dallion continued on his own.

Feeling in a dark mood, he decided that the best place to have the next try was underground. No sooner had he thought of that, than a stone path emerged, leading down into a cave beneath the ground. No light whatsoever could be seen deeper in the cave, just darkness leading to the unknown.

**Youre in the halls of destiny.**

**Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future.**

Lux, Dallion said.

Immediately, the firebird emerged, then surrounded it with its flames. From here on, Dallion could fly if he wished, but rather he kept on walking. The stone steps continued, then curved to the left, forming a stairwell. After about five rotations, the stairway stopped at a large metal door.

*Time to see whats wrong with me this time,*

Dallion said to himself and opened it.

To little surprise, the door didnt lead to a room, but to a large swamp. The smell was putrid, though not the worst Dallion had experienced. It was the sight that was more disturbing; it was as if the

swamp had suddenly appeared in an entire city and was slowly pulling it down into the earth itself. Streets, walls, even small buildings were gone, leaving only the upper parts of towers and more massive structures remain, as a reminder of what had been there.

Suspecting a fight, Dallion split into a dozen instances and cautiously walked forward. The muck was soft, though fast enough to walk through as long as one didnt remain still for too long. Here and there, various city walls were sticking out just enough to form paths throughout the swamp. Reaching them would be easy, although Dallion needed to know where to go first.

As he walked, an arrow split the air, piercing one of his instances. Looking up, Dallion saw a figure dressed in white rags wearing a torn white cape. Unlike everything else, there wasnt a speck of dirt on it.

Are you my trial? Dallion asked. The figure wasnt someone he had seen before. That was slightly odd. In the past, his flaws had always taken the appearance of people he knew.

Instead of an answer, the figure threw another arrow in Dallions direction.

Without waiting for an order, Lux lifted Dallion up so as to be level with the mysterious enemy. At the same time, Dallion summoned his armadil shield and harpsisword.

Gleam, Dallion said. On the second, the shardfly appeared, fluttering above his right shoulder. Is that an illusion?

Nope, the familiar replied. Everything here is as real as it comes. Well, you know what I mean.

Dallion did, just as he knew that this wasnt going to be easy. However, it wasnt the environment or the enemys skills that worried him the most, it was the emotions he saw: calm sadness without regrets. The targets feelings said it all: it knew that it was going to die, even if it wasnt fair, and had nearly accepted it.

You are my trial, Dallion said, gripping the hilt of the harpsisword.

A smile appeared on the beings face that wasnt covered by bandages. And as he smiled, everything around shifted. There was no swamp anymore, but a cloud covered with white buildings, so clean that they were almost glowing. The material was unlike anything Dallion had seen, but that wasnt the most astonishing. Unlike a moment ago, the city was full of people, or rather, it was full of furies. All of them moved about, holding the standard conversations, discussing the standard trivialities of the day. Dallions opponent was among the crowd as well, clothes all new, making it obvious she was a woman. Long white hair flowed over her shoulders in clumps like soft cotton. And it was at that point that Dallion realized.

Youre the cloud, he whispered.

The moment he did, the whiteness vanished. The furies and the white ground itself fell down like water splashing into the swamp. Buildings soon followed, returning the scene to what it had been before.

Youre strong, the woman said. All you need to do is take my heart to pass your trial.

Dallion didnt budge. He knew what was expected of him, but didnt want to do it. Sensing his hesitation, his opponent shook her head.

If you dont, this is where youll remain. You need to make hard decisions without breaking. If not, you're not ready to move further along.

Tough choice, the white figure said.

Before Dallion could answer, three more arrows flew his way, all of them easily avoided thanks to his combat splitting. It made another thing clear: as painful as it was for him to take the heart of his opponent, she had no qualms about hurting him.

Upon reaching the level of the swamp, Dallion focused and performed a horizontal line attack. Unburdened by reality, the line of destruction spread through the half-sunken city, slicing what buildings remained like blades of grass. Swamp water splashed up, quickly pierced by a new array of arrows.

Dallion quickly covered himself with the shield. Knowing exactly what its owner was doing, the object extended, causing all the arrows to bounce off. It was at this point that Dallion combined two skills he hadnt in a very long time.

Taking a deep breath, he pulled the shield towards him, then thrust it forward in a point attack. Both his arms felt slightly numb, though it was nowhere nearly as bad as it had been in the past. Like everything else, he was starting to get used to doing such types of attacks.

The force continued forward like a bullet, hitting the woman faster than she could react. Normally, this would have been the end of the trial, though not in this case. The figures entire body burst like a pillow hit by a large caliber bullet. However, the white fluff didnt fade away. There were no red rectangles indicating the damage done, nor was there the green rectangle marking the end of the trial. Instead, the cloud fragments moved together again, recreating the woman.

Youre a cloud, Dallion said, as his shield shrunk to its normal size.

Surprised? the figure asked.

Not particularly. I knew you werent human. He did think she might be a fury, though.

A single thought was enough to get Lux to boost Dallion forward. Seeing that, the cloud flew forward as well. A foot before coming in contact, both stopped, at which point the actual battle began. Dallion burst into two dozen instances, attacking his opponent in a wide array of strikes. Despite being unable to split, the woman proved to be more than his match when it came to speed. More importantly, each time Dallion would slice through her body with his harpsword, the blade would simply pass through. It was as if he was fighting air, only this air could fight back.

Dallion ignored him, doing a point attack thrust right through her. The strength of the attack was enough to reduce her to fine mist. However, even that didnt deal any actual damage.

*You cant harm her that way. You know that. The only way to win is to use it.*

*You dont have a choice. You either use it, or end the trial. Theres nothing in-between.*

Im not using that butchers tool! Dallion shouted. His voice, full of bitterness and anger at his own helplessness, echoed throughout the swamp.



This was what was stopping him the simple internal conflict. It was nothing new, Dallion had seen it illustrated in many movies, games, and comics: a character that was good at something that he hated. Now, more than then, he realized that it was an impossibility. Nil would have called it a living paradox. There was no way someone could become good at something he hated so much. Either they didnt really hate it, or they werent as good as they were made out to be. Right now, in this trial, it was Dallions moment to make the unpleasant choice: whether to give up on what he was doing or learn to live with it.

#### Chapter 438: The Price of a Heart

Dallion struck the cloud in the side. His Mind trait was high enough to let him see a flash of target markers an instant after he did. It had been a while since hed relied on those, but this was a turning point. Each successful hit caused the white figure to pause for a split second, until after five successes, Dallion was able to burst into a multi-attack, doing the equivalent of a dozen strikes in the course of one. Any other creature would have been devastated by such an attack, sadly fighting a cloud proved to be completely unaffected. It was similar to the time Dallion had fought a slime back in the dawn of his awakening, but to a whole new level. At least in the case of the slime, blunt attacks had an impact. Against this opponent, nothing seemed to.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion spun around in the air, slamming the white figure with his shield.

#### **MODERATE WOUND**

##### **Your health has been decreased by 20%**

This was the fourth such attack Dallion had suffered. Of course, damage of such a scale hardly mattered with Lux around, but it was a reminder that Nil was right. There was no point in delaying his decision. Even with his current stamina and health regeneration capabilities, there would come a moment when Dallion was too tired to continue. It might take hours, days, or even weeks, but it was inevitable.

There had been several instances in the past when the Green Moon had actively helped Dallion during a trial. However, this time, there was no answer.

Gleam, can you help out? Dallion attempted to fly away. Sadly, his speed was easily matched by his opponent. The shardfly attempted to help by attacking herself, but the only thing that did was to distract the white figure for a moment.

Dallions head felt like it would split. Every fiber in his being screamed that he should summon the thread splitter. At the same time, every fiber also screamed for him not to do so. As the saying went, he was damned if he did and damned if he didnt.

Helped by the advice, Dallion constructed a mental image of him sitting at a table with two boxes in front, one labeled A and the other B.

Dallion considered it. Funny how he hadnt thought of it before. Technically, that was a way out. It wouldnt help him get anywhere, but it would allow him to keep on doing the things he liked. The general had told Dallion that he wanted the heart of a cloud creature, but he had also failed to give him a deadline. As far as he was concerned, Dallion could well spend a hundred years searching for cloud citadels to complete that request and he would still not be breaking his vow. It was a lawyers way out, but a way out nonetheless.

Reaching forward Dallion took the B box and put it in front of him. He had no idea what the box stood for, but it didnt matter. It was one possible choice, and as the voice said, it was better to think in the abstract.

Time returned to normal, with the cloud throwing two more arrows in the direction of Dallions torso. Splitting into half a dozen instances, Dallion successfully blocked the arrows with his shield. Then, he summoned the thread cutter knife and struck at his opponent.

## **AVERAGE STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 50%**

An expression of disbelief appeared on the clouds face, along with the red rectangle. Her glance moved from the weapon in Dallions hand to the rectangle, to her left arm. Similar to dozens of times, the attack had sliced off half of her appendage, causing it to turn into a small cloud. However, this time the cloud didnt reattach.

That was the strength of sea iron. It wasnt as strong or powerful as the rest of the magical metals, but in a few specialized cases, it could do what no other material could.

So, you made your choice, the cloud said. I didnt think you had it in you.

I didnt think I did as well. Dallion did another strike. His heart tightened as the blade sliced through the white figures leg, causing another red rectangle to appear.

There was no white rectangle displaying the beings health state, there couldnt be. After all, this was a creature that Dallion hadnt seen before, one created through the fear of his mind. And just as his fears were flawed, so was the way he viewed this trial.

I dont want to kill you, he said, fighting through the pain in his chest. I just wanted to make it clear that I could.

There never was any doubt. The moment you stopped pulling yourself back, youd easily be able to defeat me.

I dont even want you to surrender.

This made the woman float slightly back in surprise.

Youre giving up the trial? the cloud asked. Even after you cut off my arm?

I need your heart to complete the trial. However, I dont need all of it.

The puzzled expression on the others face turned into a smile.

I kept thinking of you as a person, but you arent. Youre a cloud, and for a cloud, a heart is very different.

A cloud fragment could be as large or as small as it has to be, the white figure agreed. Its not an organ thats located in a single spot, its a focal point of energy or magic. Even if its painful, taking a small part wont kill me and youll still keep your vow to the general.

Both choices. Dallion nodded.

But what if youre wrong? Theres no telling what a real cloud might end up being. What if its heart is no different from yours?

In that case, Ill just scrape off a bit from the edge. A few cells of a heart are still part of a heart. If the general wanted the whole thing, he should have given me a much larger cube.

Laughter filled the air, each ringing with joy and hope. Dallion could see it radiate from the being like waves, changing everything they touched. The rags and bandages peeled off, changing into flawless white clothes. Building remains grew, rising to the state they had been in the past, even the swamp seemed to be erased with every touch of the sounds. Not after long, Dallion found himself in the middle of a cloud citadel again, only this time there were only two people present: him and the flaw he had been facing.

Letting her feet touch the ground of fluffy white, the cloud reached into her chest with her left hand, then took out a small puff of white, no larger than a ball of cotton.

Heres your heart, she said. Take it and the trial will be over.

Its not enough. Dallion said. I had to work a lot to get this right, so I want more than passing the trial. I want another echo.

Are you sure? Youve already got a few.

None that are initiates.

Its nice that you ask for our permission to remain in your realm, but you know you dont have to? Were your creations, after all.

Well, yeah, but you have your own personalities. Besides, creating copies of myself is really weird. If I have to, at least let it be from the subconscious elements of my mind.

You know Ill agree.

Only if its what you want.

If someone offers you existence, what else can one want? There was a sudden burst of mist covering everything. Even splitting into a dozen instances revealed nothing but whiteness in all directions. When, in a few seconds, the mist faded away, Dallion was standing at the threshold of a small stone room.

**You have broken through your forty-second barrier.**

**Our level has increased to 42**

**Choose the focus that will serve you best.**

Once again, Dallion chose to improve his perception. According to his plan, he was going to boost that up to twenty-five before switching to reaction again. Of course, any achievements he managed to make along the way would be more than welcome.

Now that the trial was over, the pain in his chest had subsided. Not only that, but all the dark feelings had vanished as well.

Looking down, Dallion focused on the blade he was holding. It was definitely going to be quite useful and deadly just like a surgeons scalpel. The general had given him quite the useful gift. He had also made sure to place a few spying echoes within it. After a mild threat, though, all of them had poofed out of existence one of the benefits of having ones very own crackling.

Unsummoning the thread splitter, Dallion made his way back up the staircase.

Took you a while, an echo of him with white hair and white clothes said. Just as all other echoes before, this one too had changed into a version of Dallion, although he had kept certain elements of his former appearance. Just please dont name me cloud.

No months or days either, the echo added. And no colors either.

Youre very picky. Dallion crossed his arms.

No more than the current.

That was probably true. Even so, Dallion hated coming up with names. He was bad even back on Earth. In most of the cases, the names he really wanted were already taken, forcing him to resort to random objects. This was going to be no different.

Ariel, Dallion said, half expecting the new echo to protest. To his surprise, it didnt. You know what it means, right?

I know most things you know, Ariel replied with a smile.

Most? What happened to all?

Im a bit more powerful than Gen and July. I have an idea of some of the things going on. And most is good. As you said, each of us has our own personalities. Why burden ourselves with more of yours?

Really funny. Dallion shook his head.

There was no doubt about it Ariel was going to fit right in.

#### Chapter 439: Final Trip Together

Dallion woke up well into the night. This was the first time he had slept so well in quite a while. Back on Earth, or even the first days in Nerosal, he would have stretched, then turned to the other side to sleep some more. Ever since hed started training to be a hunter, his attitude had changed.

Dallion closed his eyes, then slowly counted to ten. Once that was over, he briskly stood up and started his quick training routine. As Vend had told him, it was always wise to go through a quick regimen of exercise in order to boost the improvements provided by the awakened traits. Normally, that would take about ten to fifteen minutes. Thanks to vastly increased traits, Dallion usually finished in less than one.

You still have a few hours, Eury said from the neighboring room.

The gorgon had clearly been up all night. Then again, she handled sleep much better than him. When he had first met her, Dallion used to think that she was one of the people that were late to go to bed and late to get up. Now he knew that all that had been an act. Eury tended to stay up all night and only take scattered naps throughout the day, creating the illusion of being a late riser.

Im fine, Dallion said. Still have to pack.

There was no reply. When Dallion focused on getting a feeling of the situation, he could feel nonethe gorgon must have already put on her blocker ring.

Taking a moment to have a quick wash in the small bathroom of the workshop, he then put some clothes on and went to check on Eury. To little surprise, she was at the workbench, working on an item Dallion wasnt familiar with. It resembled the wireframe of a gauntlet or a strange hand brace.

Still feeling down? Dallion approached. Several of the gorgons snakes moved slightly, turning in his direction, but Eury herself didnt turn around.

No, she replied. With her ring on, Dallion had no idea whether she was telling the truth or not. He very much wanted to hug her, but given her mood, it didnt seem like the best idea. Maybe once all this was over.

Ill pack my stuff.

The snakes on the back of Eurys head moved in a wavethe gorgon nod as Dallion liked to call it. Clearly, she didnt want to be disturbed. It wasnt what he had hoped for, but gave Dallion a good opportunity to sneak to hide the thread splitter in his boot. Originally, that section had been reserved for the dartbow, but that was rarely used now. Dallion always brought it with him, of course. Having a loaded dartbow had its occasional uses, but it was something that could as well go in his backpack.

Even at a slow pace, it took him twenty minutes to get everything ready. Naturally, he included several sets of warm coats. If Nil was to be believed, it was going to get quite cold in the area they were headed. Back on Earth, Dallions experience of low temperatures was for the outside to be cold enough for water to freeze. Here, things got considerably colder. The experience on Glass Mountain came to mind. Hopefully, the upcoming winter wasnt going to be as harsh.

By the time returned to the main room of the workshop, Eury had finished as well. It was little surprise that her backpack was considerably larger than Dallionsor anyone else in the party for that matter. Eury was the groups forger, and as such, she would occasionally take what was needed for her to reinforce armor on the go. In contrast, Jiroh barely carried anything at all; as a scout she didnt need to.

Ready? Eury asked.

Dallion nodded.

Lets go.

Didnt you say we had a few more hours?

They were for you. Now that youre up, theres no point in wasting them.

Five of the moons were glowing when the pair left the workshop. Dallion had yet to figure out a pattern. At this point all he could do was trust the common explanation according to which the Moons only glowed if they were interested in what was going on below. It was expected that the Purple Moon would remain mostly hidden, but Dallion was somewhat worried that the Cyan Moon was little more than a circle in the night sky as well.

Without a word, Eury took Dallion through the city, gathering the hunters one by one. All of them already had their blocking items as they joined. Their expression, however, said it all: they were aware that this would be the last hunt for them together.

Were still going through the city, right? Largo said, in typical fashion. However, it was obvious that he had forgotten all grievances he had just a few weeks ago.

As promised, Eury said curtly. City first, rest after.

Wheres Ji?

Outside.

That was all that was relevant at that point.

Leaving the city turned out to be slightly more complicated than before. The countless soldiers not only did a good job keeping people from coming in, they were twice as strict when people tried leaving, especially at night. Being the only gorgon in the city, Eury was quite well known, as were her links to the overseer. Even so, it took a lot of convincing to let the captain in charge of the garrison to let the party through. Everyone's emblems were checked and rechecked until finally they were allowed to pass through the gate.

While no one said it out openly, everyone knew that the number of forces wasn't only due to the fact that the city had become a capital. This was a force build up. The only question was whether the troops were amassing for matters within the province or outside of it.

The way things are going, we might not be able to get back in when we come back, Largo whispered.

No one replied, but they shared his fears.

Jiroh was waiting a short distance away on the main trade road to the city. Ever since he'd known her, Dallion had only seen her in casual city attire or strapped in light armor, when circumstances required it. This time, she was wearing a considerable amount of metal armor elements, almost to the point that she resembled March.

From what Dallion could tell, the material was some sort of silver sea iron alloy. Quite an interesting coincidence, without doubt.

You're early, the fury said. I didn't think the guards would let you out before morning.

Almost didn't, Eury said. What's the plan?

We'll be heading northwest. We'll have to cross a few kingdoms, but that shouldn't be an issue. They're used to hunters. We move quickly and quietly as a group. We don't stop unless we have to until we reach the Shell Sea. Then we continue further in."

That sounded logical, if a little vague. When Fevre had told them how to reach the location, he had only given them a direction from the Glass Mount. Hopefully, it was going to be enough.

Do we pass through Halburn? Largo asked the obvious question.

Only on the way back, the fury replied. It was clear she didn't want to face her sister before leaving, possibly out of fear that would make her change her mind. Thinking about it, it made sense that she left everything else behind. Burning all bridges ensured she had nothing to go back to. One other thing, Jiroh continued. I'll be leading this one. Just so you know.

No one argues against it. Moments later, the party was on its way.

Day and night lost their meaning. Every single moment, the group was on the march, walking at a fast pace, all with a single goal in mind. Hunting was avoided, as were groups of people. Guided by Eury, the party went through the wilderness, following almost a straight line. The only food eaten were travel rations, and even that was done while walking.

After five days of non-stop traveling, Jiroh allowed the party to stop for half a day to get some actual rest. Sleep was done in turns, three people at a time, and once over everyone continued walking.

Taking advantage of that brief moment, Dallion proceeded to level up as well as increase his skills a bit. The trial was remarkably easy considering what he had been through the last time: a straightforward fight against a horde of creatures, focusing on his use of abilities. The battle itself was exhausting, requiring Dallion to use every trick he had learned, however, there wasnt any mental anguish to be felt. With that, Dallion reached his target number of twenty-five perception, leaving him to focus on other traits.

Dallion also took advantage to spend a few true time weeks learning the nymph and dryad languages. In both cases, he was told that it would be better if he focused his efforts on one of them, but he refused to listen out of stubbornness. As a result, he managed to grasp the basics of both, increasing his writing skills to four, even if he sounded like a tourist.

After another week, the process repeated. Dallion managed to sneak his way through another barrier. Having to do with his current fears, this was the only trial so far, in which the goal wasnt to defeat an opponent, but rather not start a fight. Although slightly easier than before, thanks to Gleam and Luxs help, it too proved to be exhausting. At that point, Dallion decided to increase his reaction trait. Also, since this time around the group was granted a bit more time to rest, Dallion used that to improve a few minor items he was carrying to boost his guard and attack skills. The effort was obviously noticed by the rest of the group, though only earning a passing comment.

As the third week of walking went by, Eury pulled Dallion aside, falling back from the rest of the group

Stop here, she whispered. Theres no point increasing anything else.

Whats going on?

Practice is more important than levels, she avoided his question. Youll have plenty of time to reach your level cap when we get back.

What arent you saying? Dallion went straight to the point. Normally, hed leave it to Eury and the rest, while pretending not to be concerned. After seventeen days of traveling, he wanted to learn a bit more of the big picture.

I dont want you tired when the fighting begins.

Dallion almost stopped walking.

Weve arrived? he asked.

Soon. Well have another rest before that. This time, I want you to rest. Thats more important right now.

Alright. What do you think well face?

I dont know. However, its not normal that we managed to get all this way without any creature targeting us. You dont have a travelers emblem, so there shouldnt be anything keeping creatures away. And yet

She didnt finish the sentence. There was no denying that the gorgon was right. The trip so far had been remarkably unremarkable. Normally there were at least some wilderness creatures observing them from a distance. So far, that hadnt happened, as if all monsters had been killed or chased out of the area. The Order of the Seven Moons was capable of cleansing an area of monsters, as were armies. Neither explanation was particularly good.

You think someone has reached it before us? Dallion asked.

I dont know, the gorgon replied. However, Jiroh told me that we werent the only ones trying to find a cloud citadel.

#### Chapter 440: The Starving Port

Dallion felt the hand that was about to shake his shoulder long before it touched him. Instinct made him split into the instances the moment he did. It didnt make any differenceEurys arm split into instances as well, always finding its way onto his shoulder.

Try to break the habit, she said calmly. There are creatures that react to it.

Ill keep it in mind, Dallion said, ignoring the echo. Anything happen while I slept?

Nothing, the gorgon replied, with an intonation suggesting that was a bad thing. Absolutely nothing. Ji took a look around while you were sleeping. No creatures, no tracks. There hasnt been anything for weeks.

That sounded bad.

Stretching a bit, he folded the fur he had used to cover himself with, then added it to his backpack. A slight chill passed through him, as he didthe weather this far west was colder than he was usually used to. Combined with the approaching winter, this was a reason for him to take a few precautions. Ever since hed come to this world, hed seen very few instances of sick or undernourished people. Wounds were by far more frequent. The few instances of actual sick were nearly all due to Star spawn or some other beast of the wilderness.

Quickly and efficiently, the hunters packed up. Not long after, Jiroh returned to the scene.

Anything? Eury asked.

Dead herds, the fury replied. Whatever killed them must have been something nasty. Not even the predators touched the corpses. Plants seemed well enough.

What does that mean? Dallion asked.

Dont worry, its nothing to do with us. Just be careful what you eat until we reach the port. Also, dont mention were from the empire to be on the safe side.

Wont they know? Dallion asked.

Hunter emblems, Largo tapped his chain. We might be from anywhere.

The explanation was valid, though Dallion didnt get why they were hiding it. Hunters were supposed to be above countries and nations. As far as the world was concerned, they were



mercenaries fighting the monsters in the world. According to the code, which Eury had shared, hunters never took sides. If they did, they were no longer hunters and had to put on another emblem.

Reaching the city took several hours, but long before they got within sight, Dallion was able to feel the strong smell of the ocean. It had been ages since hed been able to experience anything of the sort. Back on earth, he wasnt exactly the beach-going type. Of course, that was back when water terrified him. Now that his fears were gone, he was looking forward to the experience.

*Whats the difference?*

*The difference is that I know this one is real.*

There was also the small issue of size. While the sea in the sword realm was quite large, it couldnt compare to an ocean three times larger than the continent the empire was on. According to Nil, no one knew what was beyond the ocean, and even if there was anything at all. The Moons were silent on the matter, the Order refused to comment, and the Academys findings were highly contested, as usual. For all Dallion knew, the ocean could well cover the rest of the planet assuming this was a planet.

Whats our story for when we get there? Dallion asked.

Were hunters, we dont need a story. Largo laughed. Just act important and leave Ji do the talking.

That actually works?

More often than youd think.

The port town was called Bevanna, and was relatively cut off from the rest of the world. At some point in the distant past, it had been a major trade center, though in the last few thousand years it had fallen on hard times. The crops within the towns domain were poor, and even the people looked more like villagers than actual townies. By the smell of it, fish was the staple diet here and in large quantities. The stench and the state of the buildings also suggested that there werent many local awakened.

The few guards that were at the city entrance were highly surprised that anyone would want to go to the port willingly. Despite the few occasional revivals in the last few centuries, the town remained half empty and with no product that anyone would want. With current transport speeds, any food caught there, even if Bevanna offered a good selection of sweet and saltwater fish, would likely rot, making export unsuitable. Things must have been likely different in the age of nymphs. Some of the buildings still had architectural elements from the nymphs even now, suggesting that trade must have flowed both ways through this place. Back then, the town might even have been a city, though neglect and poor maintenance had made it lose a few levels.

*Nah, the architecture. Its a cool fusion.*

Freshest fish around! A street urchin rushed to the crowd. The rags on his clothes suggested that he had little to do with fishing, but even less with anything that actually paid. Dallion could feel the hope emanating from the childs being hope that hell earn a little something to get some food. You wont find any better fish in the whole of Bevanna.

Within moments a crowd of other children swarmed the group. Seeing that the first hadnt been harmed, they let go of their fears, trying desperately to earn a little something. The sad part was that

even if Dallion were to give them a silver each, they wouldn't be able to do anything with it. The city itself seemed beyond poor.

They're starting, Dallion whispered, so only the other hunters could hear.

And what fish do you offer? Jiroh asked with a smile, turning to a few of the children.

Her action made several of them quickly step back as fear filled their hearts once more. Strangely enough, it wasn't the fact that Jiroh was a thunder fury that frightened them, but her armor.

That was one option. It made sense that clerics would pass through, then move on.

She said she wants to buy some fish, Dallion said, adding a bit of calm in his words. The music skill had an almost instant effect. Not only did the children relax, but they were overjoyed by the response, grabbing and pulling the hunters along the road, until they reached a fisherman's market not too far from the piers.

The sellers were quite a lot, given the size of the town. At a quick glance Dallion was able to spot dozens of species he had never seen, let alone tasted. About a quarter of the sellers were those selling fish, while the remaining three-quarters were those preparing it.

Hey, Jiroh approached a large woman who appeared to have the most cooked fish from anyone around. How much for the lot?

The woman looked at Jiroh, then at the salivating children around her. She knew exactly what was going on, but still wanted to make a profit. Judging by the emotions coming from her, she wasn't in much of a better situation either.

Two gold, she said. In silver.

Twenty silver it is. The fury took a pouch from her belt and counted the appropriate amount. Will this do?

The seller looked at the coins, then at Jiroh again. For the faintest of moments, a flash of gratitude passed through her expression before reverting to its normal frumpy state.

Yeah. She grabbed the coins. Move along. I know what to do, she added, starting to hand out food to the children.

It was an almost painful sight. Dallion, however, focused his attention on one of the fresh fish merchants a few stalls away.

How much for one of everything? he asked.

It ain't cooked, a short man replied. If you want to feed them, bother one of the other"

I know, Dallion interrupted. How much?

This caught the seller by surprise. His eyes widened, as he stood speechless and motionless for several seconds, while his brain figured out what to do.

Seven silvers? he asked tentatively.

Dallion nodded, then took out the amount and placed it on the stand.

And a basket to keep them in.

Suure!

In all probability the man hadn't seen so much money in a long time. That raised the question: why was he selling seafood and to whom?

You come here to buy a house? the man asked as he started gathering one of each fish he sold and putting it into a reed basket.

No, just passing, Dallion replied. We're hunters.

Ah, hunters. The seller nodded. We had a hunter a while back. Dwarf, but still a good fella. Killed a monster further up the river. Everybody was happy. Those were the days

What happened after? Was there a war here?

Might as well have been. A few merchants came by, asking if we had any metal to sell. Were a seaport we don't have metal, or anything else of the like. Having a war would have been good for us. Instead, we got this he moved closer to Dallion, covering the side of his mouth with a hand. There was a plague. All the fish up-river suddenly died. And it wasn't only the fish. The fields got poisonous too. The nobles were the first to go. They weren't anything special, but they always took care of the city. They liked to eat food fresh from the fields. After that, no one dared eat a grain.

That explained why everyone was so undernourished. They were all relying on fish and fish alone. With no nobles to repair things, masons, artisans and fishermen were the only people who had anything useful to offer. Everyone else was doomed to a painful existence of begging.

When did this happen?

A few months ago. Everyone who could left this place to try their luck elsewhere. I'd have left as well if I were younger.

What about the Order? Don't they have a temple or shrine here?

The clerics died along with the nobles. Shrine is still here, mostly empty now. It's bad luck to go there. The Moons have forsaken us, he whispered, then got back to filling the basket. If it weren't for the traveling merchants, we'd have been long dead.

Traveling merchants? Dallion asked as he took the basket the man handed him. It was rather heavy, by a person's standards, and filled to the brim with fish and crawfish.

Came about ten days ago. Bought three houses by the shore. Paid in gold and traveler emblems.

That was very peculiar. There had been a traveling merchant in the east not too long ago, around the time that the dragon shadow appeared and started to cause problems.

It wasn't the first time, either. She came here a month ago as well for the same thing. Not sure I should tell you this, but there's talk that a merchant organization will establish a presence here. If that happens, all our problems will be over.

Yeah. Dallion nodded. They probably will. Can you tell me what she looked like?

Sure. She there was a sudden pause, as if the seller was struck by lightning. I can't remember