

Leveling up 641

Chapter 641: Retro Evil

Many things were capable of numbing pain. If Nil were to be believed, a strong enough mind was all that was necessary to allow a person to get beyond ones physical limitations. Since he was a mage, that probably was true. In Dallions case, though, the best solution was adrenalin, and currently he was getting lots of it.

The number of wounds that covered his body were more than he had his entire life. The stinging was barely noticeable. If it wasnt for the smell of blood, Dallion would have thought he was covered in sweat. The greater concern right now was stamina. Even with the fight turning in Dallions favor, it had taken him a lot more effort than he had planned. Already he had resorted to several more point attacks to reduce the manticore. Fighting using spark vibrations alone had proved to be too slow. If Dallion had continued along that route, he would have needed hours to defeat the creature, and that was beyond his time window.

With every successful attack, the manticore got smaller. Void matter had stopped pouring from the floors above, suggesting that the Star was short on it. More than likely, he was keeping the rest for himself. That was one of the things that kept not making sense. If the roles were reversed, Dallion would have swooped down to join the fight just after the manticore had formed. Nil kept insisting it was due to Moon imposed restrictions, but Dallion was no longer sure.

The manticore leapt through the gaps in the beams, making sure not to come in contact with the metal. Wounds had caused it to shrink to the size of a normal lion. Its abilities, on the other hand, were just as potent.

Leaping up, Dallion slashed at it with a vibrating harpsisword. Before he could hit the creature, scales emerged from its body, blocking the attack. Due to the sparks effect, the scales shattered, though not before the rest of the manticore had detached itself from them, escaping a safe distance away.

I could still deal with it, Aether suggested. It and the fight that follows.

Wiping the sweat off his forehead, Dallion split into half a dozen instances. All of them chased after the manticore. It was tempting to have them do point attacks, but as he had found out a while ago, point attacks required energy, even if done in instances.

Aware that they had entered a war of attrition, the manticore ran to the other side of the pyramid. It didnt tire, so it had the option of continuing the fight indefinitely. Like the Star, it had become the defender, one that Dallion couldnt just ignore.

I can take him, Nox said. The crackling had calmed down significantly now that so much of the void matter had been purged.

I dont want to lose you, buddy, Dallion replied, attempting to corner the manticore again with instances.

Then dont miss.

It was a gamble in the best of circumstances, but it had also given Dallion an idea. In half of his instances, he got into a position of a long ranged attack, then threw the Nox dagger. The manticore

leapt to the side, letting the dagger hit one of the sky steel rods. However, that was Dallions goal to begin with. The moment he saw the creature change direction, he split again. Two of his instances dashed straight at the manticore. Then, when he was a foot away, he performed his final attack.

Scales covered the whole of its body same as before, but this time Dallion didnt follow up with a standard spark attack, but went all out with a point attack as well.

The scales shattered like thin ice. Moments later, the force punched through the rest of the manticores body, causing it to pop into a cloud of spray. Minuscule black droplets flew in all directions, quickly evaporating under the power of the spark.

Finally, Dallion said to himself.

Breathing heavily, he went to retrieve his dagger. He didnt pausehe couldnt afford to. The moment the adrenaline was gone, pain and exhaustion would hit him like a ton of bricks. He had to reach the star before that could happen.

Well played, Arthurows said. Took you long enough. If you were one of my followers, youd have been elevated to second in charge that would be my representation in the world. People have killed each other for millennia to achieve that rank. Not all that many managed to make it.

Not bothering to reply, Dallion leaped up along the rebars. There were no ladders or even openings in the seventh floor ceiling, but that only meant that Dallion was going to have to make one.

I can still grant you that, the star added. Its more than anyone else could offer you. Even if you release the phoenix, youll only get some spellcrafting skills. I can give you so much more.

Spark, Dallion whispered, thrusting the harpsisword forward.

The section of void matter melted at contact, allowing him to leap through to the floor above.

There were many things that Dallion expected from the final two floors. What he didnt expect was to find himself in an eighties arcade lounge. Low round tables, egg-like chairs, pinball and arcade machines even a wall of box-like televisions were there, covering a section of the wall. There were no metal rods, no internal walls, just one vast space.

This isnt supposed to be here, Dallion thought.

To make it even stranger, all the technology wasnt made of void matter, or even local materials. The faint shimmering surrounding everything made it clear that everything had come from Earth itself.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion walked forward. A bar section was visible in the distant part of the room. To little surprise, the Star was there, sitting calmly on a tall bar-stool made entirely of plastic.

So, you made it, Arthurows said, taking a sip from a large glass. The liquid inside had the appearance of cola, but Dallion could tell that it was liquid void. Most react like that the first time they get here. Though, as I said, the vast majority don't. You may say that this is the interview section of the job. Everyone whos proved to have the skills earns a one-on-one with me, during which we discuss their future role.

If you believe that, youll believe anything,

Aether laughed.

In a way, he was right. After everything experienced in the awakening world, one could indeed start believing anything. In this case, though, the phoenix probably meant something else.

Curiously, Dallion made his way towards the bar section of the room, blood dripping on the carpet as he walked. He had almost reached his goal. The most important thing was not to mess it up now.

Like the tech? the Star asked casually. Its all functional, powered by magic. There used to be a lot more of it in the south, but you already know how that turned out. If all this wasnt in an item, it would have been overlooked.

Dallion didnt stop.

There used to be a lot of echoes as well, making it a really wild place. Those all vanished when it was brought into the real world. I tried to use chainlings to create a similar effect, but somehow could never get the proper feel.

Youre just copying the Moons, Dallion hissed.

Am I? Arthurows stood up from his seat. Or did they copy me? Youve seen them several times by now. Do you think they can create anything on their own? Thats the whole point were dragged here, to do the work for them.

That was a rather interesting approach. Thanks to the aetherbird, Dallions senses had become heightened to the extent that he could feel the Stars lies, like faint static in the background of his voice. There was no denying, though, that his explanation was in part true. The technology level of this world was low and by what Dallion had seen, based on otherworlder knowledge. One could almost call it organic, though only when it came to small things. Massive changes, similar to those the Star had attempted to achieve, were non-existent, almost as if the world itself was suppressing the knowledge. Dallion had constantly felt that his imagination was becoming more limited with each day. It always took a fright or traumatic experience to shove him to think out of the box again.

So, youll create a new world? Dallion asked. A better world, right?

Nope. The annoying smile vanished from Arthurows face. If I do that, the world will be destroyed and everything will have to start from scratch. However, there are ways of bending the rules without breaking them.

The skill gem.

Always looking at the small picture. The Star shook his head. The gem is a means. The only real way to push things forward is to be able to set the rules. As long as the Moons oversee things, itll always be the same. Whenever we get close, theyll smack us down. Some thought that the way to achieve this is by creating so many innovations that they inevitably copy one of them. Make use of their boredom. My way is better.

One of Dallions instances rushed forward. Faster than the pling of the eye, he combined his spark with a point attack aimed straight at the Stars chest. As he did, the void matter that formed the carpet rose up, creating a defensive cube in front of Arthurows. The destructive wave tore through it, like a flame torch through biscuits, yet even so was unable to reach the other end.

Was that necessary? The Star sighed. As Dallion suspected, in this room, he was overwhelmingly stronger. Had the attack not been an instance, but occurred in reality, it would no doubt have been followed by a counterattack, one that Dallion wasn't prepared to stop. I really don't want to mess up this room. Things from Earth are hard to get.

Instinctively, Dallion split again and did a line attack. Void matter cubes emerged all around him, protecting the furniture and arcade machines.

You don't listen, do you? A sharp edge was felt in the Star's tone. And still he didn't attack.

Won't be the first time you'd lied. Dallion took a step back. What's next? Will you offer me a Xbox if I join you?

No. You either join me or I'll kill you. That's the deal. Armor of void matter formed over his casual clothes. This means he was serious, but also that he was afraid. The Moons still have some dominion over me, so to kill you, I must follow the rules. Offering you a way out is part of the rules.

Aether, if I release you, can you kill him? Dallion asked.

Easily, the aetherbird replied. All the void matter is just for show.

Can I?

No way. Even if you didn't get any wounds getting here, you'll be squished.

Why let me come here, then?

Because only this way you'll believe me, you have no other choice than releasing me.

He's tempting you, isn't he? Arthurows frowned. I bet he's going on and on about how he can make everything right if you just release him back into the world. Did he start promising things yet?

Dallion's expression stiffened.

What did he promise? Teaching you magic? Having you take my place?

Getting Gleam back, Dallion said.

Your shardfly? It was inevitable. The species is violent and territorial. How else did you think they survived in the wilderness?

You could have stopped the other one. You chose not to.

Maybe I could have. There was a grain of doubt in his voice. Dallion heard it clearly. Is that what it would have taken for you to join me?

It might have.

I guess we'll never know. A gunblade emerged in each of Arthurows hands. Now that he was in his own domain, the weapons were a lot more finely crafted with immaculate details, and no doubt much more accurate and deadly.

Drawing the Nox dagger, Dallion tapped the Harpsisword in his leg. Just then, a rectangle appeared.

Chapter 642: The Star's Story

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Drunkards End, Nerosal, 13 years ago

The first thing that welcomed Arthurows upon arriving into the world was pain in the form of kicks to his face and stomach. The initial confusion numbed the pain initially, but as the kicks continued pouring onto him, he quickly curled up.

What the heck? He thought.

Hed never been in a fight in his life. As a rule, he considered them beneath him, but more importantly, he had never been in a position to end up in one. Growing up, he had a boring, but stable, childhood moving from place to place every few years. Being a military brat, though, he had gone through some training to make sure that if he ever got into a fight, hed know how to defend himself. That all seemed to be completely useless now.

Stop, a dull voice said lazily.

The kicking stopped. After a while, Arthurows looked up. The second thing that came over him was fear. A shabby-looking man was standing about ten feet away, holding an old flask. This was the first time that Arthurows had met him, but he knew everything about him, and most of all, he knew that he was terrified of him.

Changed your mind? the man asked as the rest of the groupthugs roughly the same age as Arthurows stood, waiting for the order to start beating him up again. Where is it?

For some reason there is a rumors had been circulating that Arthurows had come into possession of a pouch of silver coins. That was a lie, of course. No one in Drunkards End had held so much money. The few coins that managed to make their way into the slum of Nerosal were quickly exchanged for alcohol. Everyone capable of leaving the place did so. Those that couldnt become bitter and did their best to drag the rest with them. Jyan was one such person. According to the rumors, hed done business with the Mirror Pool at one point. What and how was never specified, but the rumor alone was enough to make a lot of people scared of him. It didnt help that despite his drinking, he was way stronger than most.

Break his arm, the man said.

Instantly, the gang of people rushed, grabbing Arthurows from all sides.

The left, Jyan clarified.

Arthurows felt several hands holding his arm. This wasnt the first time this had happened to him. Hed had several ribs cracked, fingers broken, and even a leg once, all in a similar manner. This time, when he tried to pull away, it actually happened. With next to no effort, his whole arm free itself from, almost as if it wasnt held at all. And things didnt stop there. Grabbing the opportunity, Arthurows stood up, pushing one of the thugs so that he could make his escape. The man flew back ten steps, falling in the ground with such force as if hed been run over by a cart.

Everyone stopped in place. Everyone was trying to figure out what was going on. In their mindssame as in Arthurowsthere was no way he could display such strength. And yet, he had just done so. It was then that the cogs in their minds turned.

Hes awakened, Jyan said, more with annoyance than fear, Lucky punk. He spat on the ground.

Awakened, Arthurows repeated mentally.

He had no idea what that was, but he knew that it made him strong. His thoughts wandered back to the events of a few minutes ago, back when he was in the small windowless room. The blue rectangle had told him to choose a trait and so he had, crushing it with one strong punch. The punch was so strong that he had even gained the achievement **Solid Fist**, increasing his body trait by an additional two points. Given that he had just become awakened there was no way to tell if a value of six was impressive. However, Arthurows didnt intend to waste time finding out.

Without hesitation, he turned to one of the people nearby and hit him in the right shoulder. There was a loud pop followed by the loud screams as the man rolled on the ground in pain.

Get away from him. Jyan turned around lazily. The guards probably on its way.

The city guard?

From what Arthurows could remember the part of his memories that was from this world the guard was composed exclusively of awakened. It was said that they had the strength of fifty men, not that he had seen them fight. They never came to Drunkards End, and for the rest of the time seemed to focus on pickpockets and the Mirror Pool. It wasnt that which worried him, though. There was a rumor that they also dealt with stray awakened, and right now Arthurows fell in that category.

A new wave of fear swept through him. According to the law, awakened were not allowed to fight non-awakened. Such was the divine decree from the Moons themselves. The Moons would rarely intervene in the world of portals, but the city guard could.

He broke my arm! The thug on the ground screamed, in no condition to get up.

Arthurows hoped that some of his friends would pick him up as they fled, but none did anything of the sort, leaving him behind.

Shit! Cold sweat covered Arthurows face. There was nothing left for him to do but run.

There were several city forests nearby. If he could reach one of them, he could lay low for a few days and

A city guard in full armor emerged in front of him. This wasnt the common soldiers that strolled the streets, but a lieutenant Arthurows could recognize the decorations on his armor.

Arthurows made an attempt to break loose, but what had managed to dazzle the alley thugs was less than a joke for the lieutenant. His grip was like iron, holding him by the back of the shirt, as if he were a defenseless kitten.

I didnt do it! Arthurows screamed, struggling to escape.

Calm it, kid. The city guard said. What are you doing in Nerosal?

As they stood, more soldiers appeared on the scene. Some belonged to the city guard, but others were wearing the colors of the lord mayor.

I live here.

Several of the guards looked at each other. Arthurows expected there to be more questions. But instead, the lieutenant lowered him down to the ground and let him go. Blinded by the sudden freedom, Dallion attempted to dash away. However, when he did so, he bumped straight into the lieutenant.

Whats going on? He wondered. He had been certain that the man was behind him a split second ago. Could he be in two places at the same time?

He doesnt have any blocking items, the lieutenant said to one of the lord mayors men. What do you want me to do with him?

What did the overseer say?

Just that he appeared here. The lieutenant looked at Arthurows again. Are you a local?

Yes. Arthurows nodded. I was born in Drunkards End. But why am I so young? Only now did it dawn on him that he was roughly half the age he was supposed to be. Back on Earth, he was approaching his thirties. Upon appearing here, he was half that.

He hasnt been to a temple, one of the guards said with a smirk. They wouldnt let someone like that even if he had the money.

Did you sneak into an awakening temple? the lieutenant asked, looking Arthurows in the eyes.

No Ive only seen them from a distance.

Has to be spontaneous. The lord mayors man shook his head. By the Seven Why did it have to be such scum? People go through their entire life trying and instead

Lucky, it seems. The lieutenant interrupted. Ill take him to the overseer. He paused for a moment. Unless you want to present him to the palace.

And ruin any chances for promotion? You deal with him. And just like that, he left along with the rest of the personal soldiers.

Uncertain what to do, Arthurows looked around. None of the guards seemed in the least worried, or even paying attention to him. Somehow, he knew all that was a ruse. The moment he tried to run again, theyd grab him again, and that time he might not get away with a warning.

Come along, the lieutenant said. If you run or cause problems, therell be trouble. Understand?

Arthurows nodded.

They started walking. Arthurows expected to be taken to the nearest guard fort. Instead, he was led to a part of the city that hed never dare go under normal circumstances. The entire time, people stared at him, wondering what he was doing. Thanks to his awakening, Arthurows could hear their whispers. Most believed him to be a pickpocket, or an illegitimate child of someone important. Given the alternatives in his mind, Arthurows could only wish for that to be the case.

The house they reached was in a noble district of the city. The building, on the other hand, seemed to be rather rundown. It didn't look as rickety as the buildings in Drunkards End; this was a whole different type of rundown, as if the place had been abandoned decades ago.

A cold chill wept through the crack, making Arthurows take a step back.

Easy. The lieutenant slammed his hand on Arthurows shoulder, then shoved him forward.

The moment Arthurows was inside, the door slammed shut behind him.

This is the overseers home? He wondered.

Everyone in Nerosal had heard the rumors about the overseer. Next to the lord mayor, she was the most powerful entity in the city. Supposedly, she was able to see everything that was going on and had the ability to appear where she was needed. Of course, that was hardly true, or she would have spent half her time in Drunkards End.

Walls were scarce and furniture completely non-existent. A railless staircase led to a door on the second floor.

Anyones first thought would be to check if the door leading outside was locked. Arthurows decided to do the opposite. Now that he was starting to get used to this world, his Earth mind was taking over. The situation he had found himself in was just another problem that needed a solution. Running away was only going to make things worse, so the best course of action was to go to the overseer.

Just as he started his way up the staircase, a block of blackness emerged in the center of the room. Moments later, a figure rose from it. She was clearly female, completely dressed in black and with a veil covering her entire face. For the fraction of a second Arthurows thought he saw part of a platinum black lock of hair.

Theres no need to go up there, the woman said. It'll be better if we lead the conversation here.

Youre afraid that Ill steal something?

It'll be a lot safer for you. Having just arrived is probably enough of a shock. Theres no need to add more to it at your present level.

Level Thats what the rectangle had written on it when Arthurows had woken up in the room. He was level one. That meant

Which level are you?

Its not polite to discuss levels openly. The overseer moved towards him, almost sliding along the floor as she did. Its a lot higher than yours. Tell me, who are you?

I thought you knew everything? Arthurows couldn't keep himself from asking.

Everything is overrated. I definitely know a lot. That youre from Earth, for one thing.

You know about Earth? he gasped.

I knew someone from there once. He said its the world of humans, where miracles happen every day. Of course, its possible that he was lying.

No, its sort of true. For a medieval society, modern Earth would be full of miracles. How do I go back?

Thats one of the things I wanted to talk to you about. You cant go back.

Arthurows felt as if two mountains had landed on his shoulders.

Im stuck here?

It seems so. All otherworlders are stuck here, although most usually dont come the way you did. You still dont know anything about awakening, and itll take too long for me to teach you. Theres one thing I can say. In order to breathe through your first barrier you need dedication or the air of an awakening alter. Since you have neither, you must have been born with an abundance of luck.

I dont feel lucky. Arthurows frowned. Taking on the life of a beggar in Drunkards End is the opposite of luck.

You were from Drunkard's End, the woman corrected. Youre an awakened now. Your life has changed very much for the better. Even if you dont amount to much, youll never be hungry again. In addition, youre also an otherworlder. Using the wisdom from your world might get you far or not. It all depends on what you do. So, tell me who you are. The part of you that was born in this world.

Im Arthurowsa nobody.

Is that all?

What else is there to tell? Id love to have been something special, but Im not. My mother was a drunk. Im not sure if shes still alive. I dont even know who my father was. No one I knew was rich or important. I had to be an errand boy for drunkards to survive.

Hmm. That makes even less sense.

I didnt perform any acts of charity. I didnt find any hidden treasure, although some of the people seem to think that I got my hands on a pouch of silver.

And you still awakened. You are definitely exceptional.

Exceptional? That was the first piece of good news Arthurows had heard since waking up. Does that mean I get special treatment?

No, but Ill make sure youre given enough food and information to start. What you do after that is up to you. Keep this in mind. Now that youve awakened, I can see you, so dont do anything that youll regret.

Chapter 643: The Star's Story - Resentment

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Nerosal, 13 Years ago

Youre not thinking again, Lieutenant Zyria said. The markers are a tool. Make use of them.

Arthurows dashed forward. Not being able to defend put him at a serious disadvantage. Thinking back, maybe it would have been better if he had taken the knuckler. A shield was perfect for defense, but also good for attack. In contrast, a sword couldnt block for crap. The awakening realms

were full of red markers, showing possible attacks and they were completely worthless. Sure, Arthurows could defeat a spoon or fork guardian, but when it came to fighting more capable enemies, especially people, he was like a paper boat in the rain.

According to the lieutenant who was something like his temporary mentor the key was to learn the basics of combat and execute them efficiently in battle. Reality strongly disagreed with him. Arthurows had grasped the theoretical basics in a matter of days. He'd spend even more in the awakened realms practicing the moves and attack sequences. Even the lieutenant had admitted that Arthurows was close to perfection. And yet, he still couldn't land a single blow.

Damn it! he threw the sword on the ground. The weapon disappeared, returning to his awakening room.

You're not making use of your markers.

What's the point? It's not like I can do anything against someone who has a guard skill.

It's not a matter of skills. The man frowned. It was obvious that he didn't like doing this either. If it wasn't for the overseer's order he probably wouldn't have wasted his time teaching a lost cause. You think you'll become like a soldier in days? You're a late bloomer. You should be thanking the Moons that you awakened at all. I've spent centuries getting to where I am. The only thing you need to do right now is learn the basics and repeat them until you can defeat entities five levels higher than you. Then, you start leveling up.

Great, Arthurows said to himself. So, I'll spend the next five years improving crappy objects.

That was also an issue. He had instantly caught on that the items he was practicing on were special—they were made of wood or crappy tin, ensuring that he'd face low level guardians only. It didn't help that he had a one per day restriction. Any other training was done in a training item and only in the lieutenant's presence.

How long will it take? Arthurows asked. How long will I stay a level one?

That depends on you. An innkeeper has agreed to the overseer's request and will take you in later today. You'll be her responsibility then.

Great. Even you can't wait to get rid of me.

It seemed that being an otherworlder wasn't as impressive as it was supposed to be. With his superior knowledge Arthurows could become the ruler of this city. He should have been made the ruler. The idiots, even the awakened ones, had medieval minds. They hadn't even discovered the steam engine. Everyone was relying on being awakened so much that they didn't even consider there could be ways to make things easier for everyone. The most annoying thing was that they weren't doing this out of fear they'd lose wealth or power, but just because they were so set in their principles that they couldn't imagine anything different. Arthurows had attempted a few casual conversations about improvements that could make life easier for the guard. Most outright ignored him. The few that feigned interest saw it as nothing more than an interesting hypothetical and left it at that.

Once more, Lieutenant Zyria said. Don't try to win, just do it right.

Sure. Arthurows summoned his weapon. I guess thisll come in handy when Im serving tables at an inn.

Others cant do that, the lieutenant sighed.

Huh?

Summoning your weapon. Most cant do that until they pass through the first gate. You didnt even think about it.

I saw you do it. Its no big deal.

It is.

The next series of attacks went as poorly as expected. Arthurows made over three dozen attacks to reach the lieutenant. None of them were remotely successful. At best, Dallon got within six feet before his attack was broken. There never was any follow up. Each time the man broke Arthurows attack, hed pause, occasionally point out a minor mistake, then order a complete repeat.

There was no pleasure in that. After the twentieth attack, Arthurows stopped complaining. Ten times after that, he stopped thinking altogether, doing the attacks on autopilot.

After the last attack, reality shifted.

Damn it! Arthurows cursed, covering his eyes with a hand. Reality shifts made him dizzy. Do you need to do that each time?

Youll get used to it. There was no compassion in the lieutenants voice. Ordinary awakened puke their guts out the first few times. Keep that in mind.

If thats a prep talk, its pretty crap.

Shaking his head, the lieutenant left, leaving Arthurows in his cell. It wasnt the most comfortable place, but being an awakened, it didnt matter. He was only sleeping here, anyway.

I end up in another world and I still have to make my start as a waiter, he went to the bunk and lay down. Life had a way of being full of ironies lately. Just when he thought Arthurows had a chance of greatness, he had ended up herea nobody with potential. This time, though, he had no intention of following the path others had made for him. Before the innkeeper came to pick him up, he just left the guard fort.

No one said a wordthey didnt seem to care, or at least not to the point to mess with his life. The only concern was that the overseer might disapprove. But when Arthurows stepped past the building threshold, he knew that she let him go. Now, finally, he could take his path upwards.

Finding a job as an awakened was a lot easier than he expected. Taverns and inns were always in need for awakened, even at a low level. While improving items was limited, mending wasnt. That was another thing the guards had taught him. It was an annoying thankless activity, but it paid off.

After some consideration, Arthorws decided to join a mending shop. The time schedule was a lot more flexible there, and payment was instant. Half of the money earned would go to the shop owner, but the other half was more than enough for his needs. As for lodgings, Arthurows returned to his old home.

The first person he went to see was his old friend Jyan. While they hadn't parted under the best of circumstances, things were different now and it was time for Arthurows to show it.

Well, look whos here. The thug smirked. If it isn't the big awakened himself.

None of his gang dared laugh. Instead, they slowly moved away, letting Arthurows make his way to their leader.

What do you want?

I should break your fingers for everything you've done to me, Arthurows began. But that won't be beneficial for either of us.

He tossed a small pouch of coins.

You said you wanted a pouch of silver. There you go. Only this time, you'll have to do a few things for me.

Jyan picked up the pouch from the ground and opened it. There were probably more silver coins than he had held in a long time. Even so, his expression didn't budge.

And how may I help someone like you? the man asked.

I want you to get me things. Simple things. And I want a place to work undisturbed. I might be an awakened, but you know how things go. So, what will it be?

Role reversals were a difficult thing to handle. However, those at the bottom knew what was the alternative. There were no complaints or grumbles, or even a stare. Jyan simply nodded and went back to his business. With that, the seed had been set.

The next few weeks passed in mending during the day, and working on contraptions during the night. Arthurows had quickly learned that in order to progress he'd have to boost his level, which he could only do at the awakening shrine, for a rather large fee. In order to procure the funds, he was going to start something simple: a toy that defied reason. Given that the world had magical races, this was a difficult task. Initially, he thought a steam engine model would be enough, but that was before he had found that furies could achieve the exact same thing with next to no effort. Electricity also wasn't as impressive as one might hope. The solution was to create the one thing this world lacked: time devices.

Making a clock wasn't easy. Arthurows knew the basics. He had repaired some as a hobby, though he had never actually created one from scratch. Doing so required a lot of trial and error, not to mention favors from co-workers at the mending shop. Apparently, one of the awakened had forging skills, which allowed him to create strings and gears the way Arthurows wanted them.

Three weeks were needed to start the first device to start running. One more was spent in getting it to actually work properly. Having only the sun to rely on, Arthurows took a while setting the time. There was no telling what exactly time was, but since there was nothing to compare it with, the time that was set was certain to be the correct one.

The clock was as large as a small buckler. The money Arthurows had spent on it was a rather large sum as far as he was concerned, although it was likely going to be pittance once he sold the device to the right person. The obvious choice was to try the nobles. However, that came with a certain

degree of risk. Arthurows had learned that people viewed otherworlders with suspicion. Thus, it would be better to sell to a merchant who would then resell it to the nobles themselves. The money wasn't going to be as good, but at least he was certain to receive it. Once he established a presence, he could well start dealing with them himself.

The arena was the perfect place to put the plan into motion. A lot of people passed through there, especially the rich, bored middle classes of Nerosal. If there was someone to show interest in a clock, they would be there. After a quarter of an hour, Arthurows was proven right.

Interesting device, a snobbish man dressed in clothes of sapphire thread said. What is it for?

It tells time, Arthurows replied.

Tells it to whom?

How?

The arrows point to numbers. Each number is part of the day and

We have ways of telling time.

Of course you do, but nothing like this. This device is unique in this world.

This made the snob pause. Having something unique was a definite draw. Having it look strange and sophisticated only made it more appealing. Arthurows had spent a large amount of time making the dial just right to attract as much attention as possible.

Quite so, the man agreed. You're here for a trade, I take it?

No, I just want to sell it. I can make more like to anytime. Or, for the right price, I can make sure never to make anything remotely similar.

Getting paid for not doing work? I must remember that one shows good initiative. Tell me, what do they call you?

Arthurows. My name is Arthurows.

Well then, I'm the general.

General of Nerosal?

He definitely didn't look old or seasoned. The closest thing Arthurows could compare him to was a rich playboy.

It's a hereditary title, the general explained. My grandfather had it and now it goes to me. What's relevant for you, Art, is that he also passed down a large fortune which I've increased through a series of good decisions. He looked at the clock. I'll take it, the unique version, and we'll see how things develop from there.

Chapter 644: The Star's Story - Recruitment

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Nerosal, 13 Years ago

Arthurows blocked the attack, then combined his acrobatic and attack skills to go on the offensive. His opponent was incompetent when it came to tactics, sadly made up for it with the nine level

difference. If it was only five levels, Arthurows would have won without breaking a sweat. At level six he already had four skills, all maxed out, and more achievements that he could remember. Abusing the system had been easier than he'd thought. To some degree it was thanks to the general. The man had turned out not to be such a snob after all. He was the only one buying Arthurows contraptions, that was for sure. He'd also loaned him gear, and on occasion given him practical advice regarding awakening. That was another loophole: since the general wasn't awakened he wasn't restricted to sharing information, unlike everyone else who could only talk about it if he already knew. If what he said was to be true, upon passing the second gate, Arthurows would be able to increase his level on his own, without the need of an altar, or the Order of the seven stars for that matter.

You're distracted, a deep voice said in Arthurows's head.

No sooner had it done so than the attack he was doing on his opponent missed.

Combat splitting, Arthurows thought. His attack had been flawless both in strategy and execution. However, it could never stand up to anyone with combat splitting. In this instance the final strike went inches past its target and was immediately followed by a strike on Arthurows' right arm.

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 50%

A red rectangle popped up, marking the end of the fight. A split second later, Arthurows was back in the tournament testing room.

That was close, his opponent said.

The man was a whole head taller than Arthurows, all made of muscles, though when it came to awakened those weren't much of a factor. What really annoyed Arthurows more than anything was that the man was a simple woodcutter not even born in Nerosal. There was no way he'd achieve anything in the tournament, yet through level alone he had stopped Arthurows from proceeding to the paupers' final.

If it wasn't for that last attack, you'd have got me. The man tapped Arthurows on the shoulder.

Yeah. Damn it!

Just one more round and Arthurows had a good chance of being noticed. He knew that nobles were always present during the finals. He had no illusions of winning there. However, he would at least have been seen. Someone his level making it all the way here was extraordinary, but only if people knew about him. As the general had said, every awakened is extraordinary in some way, it's all a matter of having everyone else be there at the right time.

I'll be scared to face you next year. The woodcutter laughed.

Arthurows did his best to hide behind a false smile. There was too much time till the next festival, and even if there wasn't it seemed that the town was conspiring against him. For starters, the city guard had inquired more about the contraptions he built. Apparently, Countess Priscord wasn't thrilled by the idea. That was stupid since the countess only set foot in Nerosal once per year to host

her festival. For the moment, the city guard had only been doing inquiries, but the writing was on the wall. To make matters worse, the Order had refused to let him visit any awakening altar in the city, until the guards inquiries were over, effectively capping Arthurows at level six. That was the whole reason why hed wasted his time applying for the tournament. Getting noticed by a noble there, would have forced the Order to let him level up. All he needed was one visit. After that hed never set foot in the blasted place! Now even that was gone.

You could have made it if you werent daydreaming, the voice in his head said. Youve got yourself to blame on this one.

Against combat splitting? Arthurows whispered as he left the room. Give me a break.

Combat splitting isnt magic. It only means the attack wasnt perfect. If it was, all the splitting in the world wouldnt have helped.

Thats crap!

The streets were packed with people. The festival was one of those things that attracted everyone from the province and quite a few from the neighboring ones as well. It wasnt a huge event in terms of the overall empire, but it made the city hell. Interestingly enough, during that time crime was to a minimal. The lord mayor had made sure to let it known that any disruptions during the countess festival would be dealt with harshly. Only after it was over could crime and pick-pocketing go back to their standard levels.

Hello, mister Arthurows, a female voice said nearby.

Arthurows didnt need to look to know who it was. For one thing, it wouldnt have helped if he had. The person who had spoken to him could be a hundred feet away. Being a fury, let her manipulate air, which also meant affecting sound to some degree.

What does the general want? he snapped, shoving his way forward.

Hed like to remind you that youre behind on your weapons rent. Should he expect another delay?

Ill have something for him by the end of the week, as promised.

Yes, hes quite aware of that. Unfortunately, the novelty of your devices has worn off. Money would be preferable.

Worn off my ass! Arthurows shouted mentally. He knew perfectly well what this was about. The general didnt dare go against the countess. The device Arthurows was building a water pump was specifically demanded by the general not too long ago. Not only had they agreed that it would cover his debts, but he was going to make a pretty penny in the process. One word from a high noble and everything had come crashing down.

Ill see to it. He hissed. It was a lie, of course. While the festival was over, he couldnt even steal the money he needed to repay his debt.

Very well, the unseen fury replied. And congratulations on making it so far in the tournament. For someone of your level, thats nothing short of a miracle.

Thanks. If its so miraculous, how about the general forgive my loan?! Arthurows wanted to yell.

This place was so much worse than Earth! Politics were just as bad, and by the looks of it, there was no way around it. Back home he could have used connections, money, or at least bullshitting to overcome his current issue. Here, there was no going round the rules of the Moonsrules that Arthurows found too useless and arbitrary.

Luddite peasants, he said to himself, making his way to Drunkards End. During the festival, that was one of the few city areas that remained empty. The lord mayor was determined to hide the flaws of the city from the visiting crowd by having it effectively sealed off. Walls were quickly built, trees planted, and as for everyone within, they were given some food to remain quiet and at home. The sad thing was that the unfortunate people looked forward to the practice since, for most, it would mean theyd get to eat some good stuff for a change.

As he approached the quarter, the crowds thinned to a trickle. The trees were planted in such fashion that they almost created the illusion of a forest spreading behind. Of course, anyone venturing would soon find a tall wall preventing any further exploration. Arthurows was just about to leap over it when he noticed someone leaning on a tree. The man was clearly a foreigner. Tall and unassuming, he was carving a piece of wood into what appeared to be a letter opener. The skill and speed with which he was doing it clearly indicated that the man was awakened.

Good show at the tournament today, the man said directly. Pity you werent in your double digits. A bit more and youd have made it to the arena, maybe even to the third day of the fights.

Thank you. Arthurows said with the largest smile he could muster. Im still lacking. Hopefully next year

Youre not lacking, the man said. Youre restricted.

Arthurows paused. It wasnt so much what the man had said, but how he said it. That was the voice of someone who understood, possibly someone who had been through the same.

As long as you follow your current path, youll have nothing but hardship and sorrow, the man continued. If you think things are bad now, wait till the festival is over.

What do you mean? Arthurowss instincts told him to get away as fast as possible. At the same time, though, he also wanted to stay.

You think the countess is keeping you down, dont you? That shes afraid of what your contraptions could do to the city, and thats why she told the Order to prevent you from leveling up further?

Isnt she?

Youre looking at it the wrong way. Its the Order that dislike your devices. They were the ones who pressed the countess to act, and she promptly did. Nobles are nearly all powerful in their domains, but the Order can take those domains away from them with a snap of their fingers. They are the true power in the world. Or at least one of them.

The Order did this? For a moment Arthurows didnt know what to think. He had always prided himself on seeing things that others couldnt. Hed abused the logic

of awakening achievements to get his traits to a value greater than people triple his level. And yet he had been completely blind sighted by the Order of the Seven Moons. All this time hed viewed them as something so distant that he never gave them any thought. The only time he had interacted was upon paying his fee to visit an awakening altar, like thousands did every day. What reason could they have to target him?

Why? he asked. Im a nobody.

They dont approve of the devices you made. In fact, they dont approve of most things related to Earth.

Youre from Earth? Arthurows gasped. This was unexpected. One of the first things he had done after leaving the guard fort was try to find others like him. Apparently otherworlders were rare, the vast majority of them living in the imperial capital.

No, but I work for someone who knows a lot about it. A higher power, if you will. Tell me, have you heard of the Crippled Star?

The memories of Arthurows before awakening in this world made him tremble. The Crippled was seen as the local bogeymana demon that caused wars, chaos, and all the evil in the world. Of course, from what Arthurows had seen, people didnt need such an entity to do evil on their own.

Sure. At his current level, even if he ran, there would be no point.

There was a time when the Star ruled over the world. Before the races were banished, there was a time when the world was different. The Star was beloved, bringing advancements that even the Moons hadnt seen, advancements very similar to the things youve been doing. Any guesses what happened?

Arthurows could guess, but he shook his head.

The Moons didnt approve and destroyed everything. The world had to start from scratch and all the good the Star did was swept away. Youll be lucky to find artifacts from that age. The man tossed the thing he was carving to the ground, then moved away from the tree. Its your fault, by the way. You tipped your hand too early, so now you have two choices. Once the festival is over, youll probably be visited by the city guard, then taken to the Order. In the best-case scenario, youll have a limiting echo introduced to your realm. In the worstyour awakening powers will be sealed, returning you to what you were before.

Damn it! All because of technology!

Alternatively, you can join me. Rather, his clothes transformed into a mass of blackness, then shifted back to a guards outfit, join the Star. The Moons only have power because you let them. They may have covered the world with rules, but there are ways around them, and the Star can show you what those are.

Chapter 645: The Star's Story - Regret

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Beneath Nerosal, 13 Years ago

The decision to join the Star cult was the easiest Arthurows had made. He was smart enough to know that the man was selling him a line, but at the same time was telling the truth when it came to the consequences to come. The festival was one big display of fakeness, but while it went on, it provided security. No crimes were committed, but also no crimes were punished.

Naturally, Arthurows had tested the theory by attempting to leave the city. It wasn't the first time he'd do so. As a member of Drunkards End, he had occasionally assisted in carrying goods in and out. Everyone knew that the things carried were contraband, but didn't care. This time, when he got near the city gates, the guards stopped him. They didn't even try to hide it, telling him flat out that he was on the overseers list of people that were not to leave the city until the end of the festival. Normally, it would be the other way around, suggesting that some sort of punishment was in store. As a result, Arthurows had gone back to the cultist and agreed to join on the spot.

The first thing that the cultist gave Arthurows was a blocker ring. The items, while expensive, weren't exactly illegal. Quite a few awakened used them to obtain some privacy. The Mirror Pool used them non-stop, as did all the good pick-pockets. This was the perfect way to go about the city undetected, as well as reaching places Arthurows didn't know that even existed.

Initially, they had gone to the arena. With the amount of people preparing for the official fights, it wasn't at all difficult. From there, things changed. Arthurows followed the cultist along a series of stairs and corridors to a dead end. There, he had used a ring to enter the realm of the arena and after traveling for a few days emerged on the other side.

I thought that you always return to the same place after leaving a realm, Arthurows said as they walked down a winding stairwell.

Normally, yes. Having a Vermillion ring changes things.

Breaking the rules. Arthurows smiled.

Just using shortcuts. You'll get one as well when you officially join.

I thought I already did.

No, you're just a hopeful. You'll get void skills soon enough and then you'll have skills and trinkets you've never dreamed of.

He'd been saying that way too often. One didn't have to be a genius to know it was bullshit. Even so, Arthurows nodded. It was all a game of lies and leverage. The cultist was offering too much not to ask for something in return.

Talking about trinkets, won't the overseer know that something isn't right? Disappearing just like that can't be explained away.

There's no way she'd notice unless you point it out to her actual form. Blocker rings do more than make someone invisible to guardians. They make the guardians not notice the change as well.

How does that work, exactly?

I can't begin to explain. That's the Stars domain. You'll understand soon enough.

A series of tunnels continued on from the bottom of the stairwell. Even with his high perception trait, Arthurows was barely able to see what was going on. All the light the cultist had brought was a small, glowing pendant. It would have been extremely fashionable in a nightclub, though a torch it

wasnt. One thing that became more and more apparent was that the architecture was very different from the surface of Nerosal. In fact, it was so different that it didnt seem to be built by humans.

Whats this place? Arthurows asked after a while. Catacombs?

City ruins. Once, there was a city here that made present day Nerosal look like a village. Originally, it was built by the copyettes.

The name sent shivers down Arthurows spine. He had been hearing rumors about the creatures since childhood. Said to be one of the banished races, they had the ability to assume any form, which they had done in their attempt to take over the world. Even now, it was said that a few had managed to escape their banishment, and were living in cities, killing people and taking their form on a whim.

Thats the reason this area is so abundant with ancient items and artifacts. Nerosal owes its existence to generations of scavengers whove dug through ruins to obtain that which they no longer can create.

Why isnt that forbidden? Arthurows felt the rage inside of him light up. Thats what got me in trouble in the first place.

Artifacts are just objects. You, with your devices, are someone whos bringing back dangerous ideas to the world. After your death, the artifacts will be highly valued, Im sure. Theyll be sought after a lot more than they are now.

That sounded like a very lawyerly way of looking at the world. Somewhere, somehow, the Moons must have decreed that it was forbidden for people to bring dangerous ideas into the world. However, nothing was said about the items themselves. Following the logic, any ancient artifact was fair game, since the knowledge regarding its creation had been lost. The moment someone successfully reverse engineered them, though, the Order of the Seven Moons would swoop into action.

All banished races had technology that appears magical to people now, the cultist continued. What few know is that they only achieved that by copying the Star. Things like railway systems, glass-metal alloys, neon-lights

Youve made all that?

No. I dont even know what the words mean. Im just saying them out loud, because I know you do. As I said, the Star also comes from another world. People from Earth are the only ones wholl understand him.

So thats what you want, Arthurows grinned to himself.

By joining the cult, he was going to become an assistant of sorts, or maybe just a person with whom to chat about the good old days back on Earth. That made sense, although it still wasnt a guarantee that the sect would have more nefarious things in mind.

After half an hour of going through a maze of tunnels and stairways, they finally arrived at a double stone door. It was massive, rising twenty feet high, entirely covered in intricate carvings. Just as the undergrounds architecture style was different from the surface, the door was different from either of

them. Looking closely, Arthurows could almost swear that the masons had carved the workings of a giant circuit board.

Is the Star a giant? he asked in the form of a joke.

The cultist didnt laugh.

Just a safety measure. Only someone with a high enough body trait can open the door. Its a crude method, but quite popular at the time.

So I just open the door and thats it?

No. Ill open the door after youre sure thats what you want.

Standard manipulation technique: create fear of missing out and make the target believe its their choice, Arthurows thought. Even so, he had to admit, feeling curious.

You cant have said that when we were above? he feigned stupidity.

Its the rules of the Moons. You must acknowledge what will happen and then proceed, if thats what you want. Same as passing through an awakening gate.

Is that something the Moons stole from the Star as well?

The silence suggested that not to be the case.

Okay, tell me the terms.

By joining the cult, youll gain void powers, allowing you to create shortcuts. You wont be able to increase your level, but youll be able to acquire the effects of higher levels. Trait levels, abilities
The man waved his hand as he enumerated. Strictly speaking, they wont be yours, but the void, and youll have the power to control the void.

Oh? Interesting. That sounds sketchy as hell!

You wont be able to obtain items unless they are given to you. Of course, you can manipulate void matter in such a way as to create anything you wish. In time, youll even be able to command and even create the beings that roam throughout the wilderness.

Monsters. Arthurows clarified.

If you prefer. They are just tools with massively destructive potential and yours to command.

Subtle. Just a moment ago, the cultist had said that Arthurows could obtain the power to command then, but now was talking as if it were a given.

I take it I wont be able to step in a building of the Order, either.

Why not? The cultists looked at him, confused. Youd have no reason to, but you can still go there.

What about the awakening altars? Will they harm me?

No, but you cant level up there. You cant destroy them either, just have others do that for you.

Arthurows was starting to see the pattern. Joining the cult was pretty much changing one sort of rules for another. Hed gain void abilities for lack of other worlds, but would lose everything else. So far, it sounded like he was given the power of copying, as long as someone else was willing to share. All that was required was to convince people to do so.

Do I get a way to make people do what I want? he asked.

Nice to see you catch on fast. The cultists cracked a smile. You cant force people, but other than that, youre free to use the usual methods. Lying, bribing, intimidation at your own risk. There are a few exceptions, but youll learn those details later. Finally, if you do really well, youll gain the ability to invade awakening domains.

Wow. Talk about shortcuts.

All awakened can invade realms after a certain point. In your case, its different. You cant conquer the domain, but rather enter it.

Like a limiting echo.

Yes, like an echo, but youre the echo.

Can I leave echoes there?

No, you cant create echoes. Thats one of the things youll lose.

It still sounded too good to be true, which made Arthurows think that it wasnt. He was undoubtedly gaining a lot, but by the sound of it, hed give a lot more. He didnt like that the cultist had forgotten to specify a limitation until asked. And that was even if he could take his word on face value. For all he knew, this would all be a lie.

Any other limitations I should know about?

A few. Youll learn all about them once you step, though.

Does that mean that if I dont like what I hear, I can still change my mind?

There was no immediate response. If this was a trick, it would have been easy for the cultists just to agree so as to get Arthurows to enter. The obvious hesitation suggested that he remained subjected to certain rules.

Im not sure, he said at last. Some have left without joining the cult, others have stayed I dont know what happens inside. Im just to lead people to the door.

So, this could be a trap.

Its not a trap.

How do you know since youve never entered? The banter was amusing, but Arthurows had pretty much made up his mind. At the end of the day, it came down to a simple binary choice. What was he willing to risk: finding out what was beyond the door or the fate expecting him once the festival was over?

Will joining the cult get the countess off my back? he asked.

Theres no changing the past. Youll still get punished, but if you join, it wont matter. Even if your powers are sealed, youll still have a way of boosting your traits. Oh, and one final thingyoull never grow old.

Well, now that you say that, I might as well enter.

Are you certain?

Yes, Im certain, Arthurows sighed. I understand the terms and conditions and am willing to hear out the real offer beyond this door. Is that enough?

The cultists stepped to the door and pressed his hand on the surface. Black ink seeped out of his hand, filling in the grooves. Even in the faint light, it was mesmerizing watching the liquid spread until both sides of the door were completely covered. Once that was done, the door cracked open; not fully, but only enough for a person to squeeze through.

The Star is expecting you, the cultist said.

I bet he is, Arthurows smirked and walked through.

The room he entered was completely dark, but even so, he could see everything there. All objects and furniture were somehow even darker, standing out from the standard darkness. The sensation was alien, making Arthurows stomach churn.

Nice of you to have joined me, a voice said. It had no accent or distinguishing features. Listening to it, Arthurows couldnt even tell whether it was male or female. I take it youve accepted the offer?

Arthurows opened his mouth, but before he could make a sound, strands of blackness shot out from everywhere, piercing his body like a pincushion.

I truly hope you enjoyed the time you spent so far.

YOU HAVE BEEN CONSUMED

Chapter 646: Into the Within

The Stars not from Earth? Dallion thought, as the memory crumbled away.

His surprise was quickly put on hold, as the Star aimed a gunblade at him. Still in a state of readjustment, Dallion was only half there, but half was enough for him to combat split again. Ten instances darted in all directions. One loud bang later and only half of them remained. Despite its appearance, the gunblade spat out projectiles like a shotgun.

The Stars not from Earth, Dallion repeated as he rolled on the ground, going for the shelter. Hes just taken the body of someone who is!

Huh? Nil sounded confused. What do you mean, dear boy?

I saw a fragment of Arthurows memories. He didnt start out as a Star. He really existed.

Didnt the Star already tell you that way back?

That much was true. During their first encounter the Star had, in fact, mentioned that hed taken advantage of Arthurows. However, he hadnt mentioned anything about Arthurows being from Earth. The boy, or man, had been just like Dallion, arriving in a world he knew nothing about. Hed had the advantage of awakening in Nerosal, although apparently that wasnt for the better. Curiosity and a

desire to progress faster had quickly caught the attention of the countess and the Star, leaving him with only bad options. If Dallion hadnt appeared in Dherma, there was a chance that he would have gone down the same path. The village chiefs tyranny and the limiting echo, which he had so much despised at the time, had actually prevented such an outcome.

Thats why Aspion was terrified of the cities, Dallion thought. Arthurows was from Earth. Thats why the Star targeted him.

With a yell of pain and rage, Dallion did another spark infused line attack. The threads of destruction flew forward, destroying part of the retro furniture that the Star so much valued. Sadly, it failed to hit its target.

With a precise leap Arthurows, boosted himself off the ground, then used the tips of both gunblades to push himself off the bar counter nearby, safely evading the attack. Both of his weapons were sliced in half as a result, but that was only a temporary setback. No sooner had he landed back on the ground that void matter trickled down his arms, reconstructing the missing bits of the weapons.

Release me, Aether insisted. Theres no point in struggling alone. Ill give you the means to defeat him. Even better, Ill defeat him by myself.

It was so tempting to agree. The Star had to be stopped at all costs. If not, the cycle would continue.

If I kill him, will the Star die? Dallion asked.

Err? the aetherbird chirped. When you kill something, it dies. Im the only exception.

Youre sure?

Of course, Im sure.

Thats all Dallion needed to know. As long as he kept one instance of himself in reserve, hed have a way out. Although, there was no telling whether the Star couldnt force split as well. Arthurows wasnt able to in the past, and so far the Star didnt seem to resort to that, but everyone powerful in this world kept their aces hidden.

Splitting into a new set of instances, Dallion did six simultaneous point attacks. Half of them missed. Two of the rest managed to graze the Stars left leg. One, though, hit him in the left shoulder, evaporating his entire arm.

You cant keep this up, Harp said.

Im fine, Dallion replied, choosing the instance in which hed dealt the most damage.

If you exhaust yourself now, you wont be able to do anything in the final battle. Dont lose your focus. Your goal isnt to defeat him in the real world. You cant manage that.

Dont tell me what I cant do! Dallion shouted mentally, then darted forward.

A few feet away from the Star, he merged a spark attack with a point attack once more. At this distance, there was no way his enemy could evade it. Black mist and ash filled the space as the

attack made contact. The strength of the force was so great that it pushed both Dallion and the Star back.

Not waiting for the dust to clear, Dallion switched hands. Doing seven powerful attacks in a row had made his arm slightly numb. Thankfully, it didnt seem too much for him to handle. If all it took were a few more attacks to finish the Star here and now, hed gladly give it his all.

Youve been practicing, the Star said.

Without warning, the cloud of dust was torn in two and blasted away, revealing a giant, half crumbled shield of void matter. The shield looked suspiciously like Dallions armadil shield when extended.

That actually stung a bit. Arthurows continued. His missing arm had now regrown be it made entirely of void matter as well. Youre trying so hard, but in the end it doesnt even matter.

Dallion split into instances again, quickly retreating. This time the tar didnt counterattack. The shield in front of him crumbled to pieces, evaporating in the air. With the current amount of void matter at his disposal, he could protect himself against anything, including spark attacks.

In his mind, Dallion went through dozens of options. He imagined himself taking all sorts of approaches, but none of them seemed particularly promising. The Star had already shown he could summon all sorts of creatures, create firearms, and shield himself against any attack. Instances could only do so much. If Lux was here, things could have been different.

Dallion rushed to the side, going into a wall run. His harpsisword was still vibrating, he slashed through the air, then thrust it forward as if doing a point attack. Just as he expected, a shield of void matter emerged in front of the Star. Even with everything to his advantage, Arthurows wasnt the type to take chances. Dallion suspected as much when hed seen that his missing arm hadnt regenerated. As the explanation in the memory fragment went: he could use void matter to create and copy everything, but not create anything on his own. If he still were a person Arthurows would have long died. The void matter replaced parts of his body, including vital organs. That meant that, while strong, he was also vulnerable.

Splitting into twenty instances, Dallion jumped off the wall, right on time to avoid the scattershot that followed.

The Star had shot through his own shield with both gunblades, obliterating half of Dallions instances in the process.

Is the void matter part of the Star? Dallion asked.

Thats a difficult question toNil began.

Aether? Dallion cut him short.

Only as long as its connected to him, the aetherbird replied. All damage done there can be peeled off before it affects him.

Another series of gunshots followed, blasting five more of Dallions instances into oblivion. Not losing any momentum, Dallion split again, heading for the opposite wall. He had one chance at this.

If he failed with this attack, there wouldn't be time for another. It was a high-risk, low-reward scenario that was better than any alternatives.

Why are you being so stubborn? the aetherbird chirped. I could end this at any point. Clearly, you can't.

Im not trading one catastrophe for another!

One of Dallion's instances leaped off the wall, attacking the Star from above with a vertical attack. Another rolled on the ground, aiming to pierce his stomach. As for the third, it continued along the wall to attack from behind. It was at this point that the Star made his move, splitting into three instances as well.

Each of the enemy instances positioned themselves to mean the corresponding threat head on. Gunblades pointing forward, the Star pulled the triggers.

So predictable, he laughed as the sound of a double shot filled the air.

The distance was too short for Dallion to evade. That's why he didn't. While the cloud of projectiles was still flying, he did a forced splitting. Mental pressure passed through him like a wave. The Star wasn't willing to let go of his victory that easily. However, there was one thing that he'd forgotten something that Dallion had recently become aware of. Having the knowledge to do something was all good and well, but unless one actually used it, the skill wasted away. The Star had been keeping his combat splitting abilities secret for so long that they had become rusty. They were adequate when catching someone off guard, but if one was prepared, they could easily use his lack of training to their advantage.

You're nothing like the dragons, Dallion thought as he pressed on, pushing towards the instance he wanted. The moment felt like minutes, but when it was over, the Star's pellets flew towards an empty space. Meanwhile, Dallion dropped from above, finishing his vertical strike. The blade, still vibrating, finished his spark attack, flying towards Arthurow's head. Before it could reach it, two more arms emerged from the Star's shoulders, each holding another gunblade. With speed greater than Dallion could achieve, they interlocked, forming a letter x.

Give it everything you got!

Dallion shouted.

The harpsisword cut sliced the blades of void matter, stopping halfway. There it stopped, stuck in hardened goo.

Nice try, Aether said. Not release me.

However, the Star had noticed which the aetherbird hadn't. While the attack was over, it had achieved its purpose. Dallion couldn't win in a direct confrontation, so he was planning for a realm invasion; and while that required contact, anything that was linked to his realm also was considered part of him, including the harpsisword. Now there was one thing left to do.

Letting go of the weapons hilt, Dallion reached under his clothes, to where the general's item was tucked and pressed it.

REALM INVASION

Everything blinked, as if reality was experiencing a hiccup. On the surface, everything was the same: the room, the participants, even the position of the furniture pieces. Yet, this was no longer the real world.

He wasn't lying, Dallion thought. The temple really is an item.

Lux! Dallion shouted.

The firebird emerged instantly, enveloping his body with blue flames.

A sizzling sound was heard as the healing flames evaporated the void matter they were in contact with.

Both Dallion and the Star pulled back. Now that they were on an equal footing, neither was willing to take any chances.

Would you look at that? Nil sounded impressed. How the tables have turned.

In the real world, time was on the Stars side. However, due to his current and earlier wounds, that was no longer the case. Thanks to Lux, Dallion's wounds were quickly evaporating, while Arthurows was trying to keep himself together. Control of void matter was an advantage, but having it replace most of the Stars body was a heavy toll.

You think you're so smart? Arthurows spat the words out. There was no trace of his previous confidence. It took you and the aetherbird to take me down last time. And even then you failed.

Really? Dallion summoned his armadil shield. He hesitated whether to summon his hammer as well, but decided against it. As good as Onda was in crafting, he wasn't a fighter. Who are you so sure I haven't joined forces with Aether this time as well?

Because he'll kill you. Are you too stupid to understand that? He doesn't like people from Earth. If you release him, he'll take me out, then turn on you and trust me. You won't be able to survive five seconds without me running interference.

Black scales of armor covered the Stars body, leaving only the face revealed.

Why would he attack me?

Because only we can defeat him! We're stronger than you think we are. The only reason we haven't replaced the Moons is because we devote half of our strength to fight the other half.

Is that the line Arthurows got? Dallion asked.

The Star froze.

That damned empathy trait! he hissed. You saw a memory fragment.

Yes. Dallion rose up in the air. Time for round two.

Chapter 647: Mutual Destruction

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

MAJOR HEAL

Your health has been increased by 50%

Instances and red rectangles were everywhere, coming in and out of existence. The fight was significantly less lethal than it had been minutes ago, although not by as much as Dallion would have liked. While minor scrapes were inconsequential, now that Lux was here, there were still too many cases of the Star killing off a dozen of his instances in a single shot. The real game changer had been the generals artifact. If Dallion was ever welcome back to Nerosal, he was going to inquire more on the topic. That was, assuming he managed to survive this.

You're doing well, Nil said encouragingly. Pace yourself and keep your focus. Everything else will follow naturally.

It was useful advice, Dallion couldn't appreciate it. The only thing he could focus on was not getting himself killed, while simultaneously chipping away at the Star. Unfortunately, it wasn't obvious how to do that.

Even with his abilities capped, the Star seemed to have an endless supply of void matter. Spark attacks and Lux's healing flames were able to evaporate anything they came in contact with, though little more. Chainlings would frequently emerge from Arthurows, going off on attacks of their own. On a few occasions, even flocks of crackling crows would emerge, forcing Dallion to resort to line attacks.

Here's one for you, Nox. Dallion spun in the air in one of his instances. Keeping the armadil shield between him and the chainling, he then twisted, burying the knife in the being's form.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

A bloodcurdling scream resounded, followed by a new blue rectangle.

NOX's level has increased to 10.

That was good, although it would have been better if the familiar had gained an additional skill. When he first had started leveling up, Dallion was certain that each level would bring a new skill. Gleam had been insistent on it, constantly pestering Dallion to let her participate more in battle. As it turned out, familiar skills and levels weren't connected.

Split up! Dallion ordered.

The dagger vanished from his hand, replaced by several dozen cublings that poured out of his body. Thanks to the general's artifact, Nox had a provisional level of seventy-one until the end of the fight. That made him seven times stronger than normal, granting him the ability to create seventy-one copies of himself.

Deal with the chainlings!

Barely had Dallion said that, that a point attack blasted a dozen of his instances along with several Noxes into oblivion.

Red rectangles stacked up, indicating the damage the familiar had received. Each box represented the death of one Nox. The total amount was low, but it was a warning not to underestimate the Star.

Sprinting forward, Arthurows spun, his gunblades extended. With the speed of a multi-attack, the weapons struck Dallions shield, pushing him further back.

Shield, Lux! Dallion shouted as he pulled his left arm out of the shields straps.

Instantly, the armadil shield grew to six feet in diameter, after which Lux propelled it, along with Dallion, forward.

The attacks on the side of the Star continued, but even his strength wasnt enough to withstand a projectile propelled by the equivalent of a shuttle engine. The Stars attacks quickly stopped. A wall of void matter emerged in front of him, protecting Arthurows from the worst effects. Half a dozen feet before slamming into the wall, the void barrier curved, redirecting the shield to the side.

Lux! Dallion called out, unsummoning the shield, then summoning it back on his left arm.

Confused at the sudden change, the firebird regained its normal form, then instantaneously flew back onto Dallion, enveloping him once more.

He really was from Earth, Dallion whispered. Such ingenuity was only associated from otehrworlders from there. Simply copying wasnt able to achieve such quick thinking where physics were concerned.

Harp, can you help me do a multi-line attack? Dallion asked.

You dont have the strength for that, the nymph replied in her unnatural voice. You have to win without it.

Dont overestimate me.

If you try what youre thinking, youll lose. Its as simple as that.

It was a bitter pill to swallow, but Dallion felt she was right. Adrenaline could only keep him going for so long. It wasnt only a matter of masking the pain and exhaustion. Some of Dallions muscles had gone numb. Hed gained enough experience as a hunter to continue with a few mental tricks and other workarounds, but it was a clear sign he was nearing his limits. Going out with a band would still be going out.

Dont even say it, Dallion preempted Aethers offer.

No comments on my technique? he asked, using his music skill to fill his words with doubt. Thats unlike you. Does it mean that youre feeling weak?

Youve already lost, the Star replied. You just dont know it.

Ouch. What happens now? Will my head explode?

Funny. The Star took a few steps forward. You still think you can use music on me? I can see the threads the moment you open your mouth.

Then why ask me to stop? Dallion persisted. If it cant harm you, itll only make you stronger. Unless you arent as strong as you claim you are. Or is there a bit of Arthurows in there?

While talking, Dallion scrambled to come up with a new plan of action. Exhausting the void matter clearly wasn't working. Maybe it was better to focus on the remaining fleshy parts? Void matter could copy anything, except that which gave the instructions for it to copy Arthorw's head.

Any advice anyone can provide? Dallion asked within his realm.

I don't believe I know anyone who's faced a Star before, Nil sighed. Other than you, that is.

You know what I'd say, Aether chimed in, gleefully.

Keep up what you're currently doing, Harp said. Strong opponents don't distract.

That makes me the weak one. Dallion wasn't sure whether he'd received a compliment from the harp's word guardian or not.

Right now, you're both weak. So don't give up.

There was a time when Dallion would have hesitated upon receiving such advice. Ever since arriving to Nerosal, people had been telling him how reckless he is, and how that limited his advancement, putting him in needless danger. Being calm and calculating was clearly the right attitude in combat. However, that wasn't the answer, either. If recklessness was a sword driving him forward, calculatedness was a shield holding him back. Driven to the extreme, both were harmful. Good fighters found a balance between the two. Since being good wasn't going to be enough, Dallion decided to be reckless and calculating at the same time.

Two groups of instances charged at the Star once more. In one set, Dallion attacked aggressively, reacting purely on instinct; in the other, he took optimal approaches, taking everything in his current environment under account. Dealing with two different strategies wasn't entirely new to him, but the contrast caused a dull pain to appear in his temples.

The Star didn't remain idle, spawning a dozen more chainlings that went forward like a pack of rabid dogs. They were a lot smaller than the ones before, but there was no mistake that they were real chainlings and not some lesser Star spawn.

Instances and beasts collided. In many, the chainlings devoured Dallion, killing his instance off with one bite. In several others, though, it was he who sliced through them like butter with a spark attack.

Soon enough, a handful of Noxes also joined in, all sinking their claws into one target. Being the same level, the beasts were more or less equal, and unlike standard fights, the one that defeated the other would have their health fully restored.

Screams filled the air. Six Noxes were impaled on spikes emerging from the chainlings' form. The remaining ones, though, managed to complete their attack, killing off the far larger creature. There was a large pop, but instead of void matter droplets, a new pack of instances burst out in all directions.

Focus on the void matter, Dallion told himself as he leaped straight at another creature.

The Star shot twice in his direction, but failed to kill off all the instances; the calculating ones had remained a safe distance away, holding the armadillo shield in front. At the same time, they didn't miss performing a spark point attack, killing off three chainlings and causing the Star to erect another void matter barrier to shield himself with.

Precisely then Dallion did something he hadn't in a long while. As he once again split into instances, he also created an echo. Leaving Nox to deal with the chainlings, he concentrated on the Star. Two hundred instances and echoes descended upon their target, going over the void matter wall, around it, or outright cutting through with a vibrating spark infused harpsisword.

A sensation of fear streaked through the Stars shell, breaking through the cracks of void. Always being the one to attack enemies with overwhelming numbers, he had trouble dealing with the experience himself. In an act of desperation, he resorted to combat shifting, bursting into a dozen instances of his own.

Got you! Dallion thought.

It had been a split-second moment of weakness, and Dallion mercilessly grasped it. The Star had been smart enough not to split during the majority of the fight. This was one ability in which Dallion exceeded him, especially now that their levels were equal. The moment he did, Arthurows realized his mistake, but it was already too late.

Both sides put all their effort into forcing the reality they wanted. The Star lost. One of his instances shot at nothing once more, while both Dallion and his echo thrust their harpsiswords into his body.

A protective shell of void matter quickly emerged. Considerably thinner than the ones before, it only partially stopped one of the attacks.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

The Star smiled in relief. Despite everything, he had somehow managed to reduce the attack to a normal blow. It wasn't at all comfortable, but at least he had survived.

Wrong one, Dallion said a fraction of a second later, as another blade ripped into him. This time, there was no protection. What was more, this was an actual spark attack, not an echos copy.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

No! Arthurows tried to should, the word emerging as a whisper.

The void barrier wrapping his emotions had all but vanished, letting Dallion see it all. Fear, hatred, regret, sorrow dozens of negative emotions pulsed within him, like roots intertwined with one another. Those weren't just spontaneous emotions, either, but ones that had been growing there for years, maybe even decades they were Arthurows own emotions, bottled inside the void matter that

TERMINAL WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 100%

A second red rectangle emerged. Dallion quickly pulled away. Splitting into instances, he checked every inch of his body, searching for an unexpected wound. None were to be seen. What was more, all the chainlings had evaporated as well.

You always wanted a draw, the Star choked as he spoke. Void matter was desperately trying to keep him together, but the final blow had proved too much. Like melting wax, trying to reconstruct itself,

it struggled to maintain the support of his body, only to melt again. You got it. The greatest draw there is mutual destruction.

STAR KILLER

(+5 Awakening, +5, Body, +5 Mind, +5 Reaction, +5 Perception, + 5 Empathy, +5 ???)

You're among the very few that have managed to kill a Star. Pity you won't be able to take advantage of this feat. Still, people will remember you fondly perhaps.

Reality blinked again. Back in the real world, Dallion's harpsword continued through the Stars blades, slicing through his head in a vertical chop. Simultaneously, he felt a momentary surge of pain in his stomach. A spike had emerged from the Stars body, effectively impaling him on the spot.

Crap, Dallion whispered as both of them stumbled to the floor. You really are a bastard

Chapter 648: Seven Traits

Hey. A faint voice said. Hey!

Dallion tried to stir. His body felt fully numb. Going all-out wasn't the best idea. He attempted to crack his eyes open, but the light was blinding, making him quickly close them again.

Wow, when you make a mess, you really go all out, the voice continued. It was still low, but Dallion could recognize it was female.

Focusing all his strength, Dallion moved his hand in front of his face. It ended up being surprisingly easy. With the light now at more passable levels, he peeked around.

To little surprise, he was on the floor again. The room was very different from where he'd been a while back. Gone were the eighties machines and memorabilia. If anything, the place reminded him of the awakening room he had woken up in before entering this world.

As his eyes adjusted, more things came into focus: doors, windows, a giant birdcage made of Moon platinum, and a small butterfly made entirely of light and crystal.

Gleam? Dallion asked. He could recognize the pattern of her light anywhere. I thought you were dead.

I'm a guardian. I don't die when an item is destroyed. I just go away for a while.

That made little sense. It wasn't in any of the scrolls Dallion had read.

I don't understand

It's complicated. Don't worry about it.

Slowly, Dallion got back to his feet. There was nothing he could lean on. The walls and the only object he could see were tens of feet away.

How are you here? he asked the shardfly.

You have it the wrong way around. You're the one who arrived here.

It took Dallion less than a second to understand what she meant. Yet, for some reason, he didn't feel regret or even shock. It was almost as if all his emotions had been removed.

I'm dead, right?

Thats not for me to say. Im just here to greet you. Took a lot of convincing, I tell you that.

Convincing... Dallion thought. Im sorry for what happened in the south. I thought youd make it. Even with the rage, guilt, and sadness gone, he still acknowledged the fact that it was all his doing.

You and I both. Its not like I didnt do the same when I was at my peak. Id have thought that hed at least let me fly away after shattering a few wings. I was glad that you made it, though. Would have been stupid if Id gotten destroyed for nothing.

Yeah. It wasnt for nothing.

Dallion tried to split into instances, but his ability didnt trigger. Left with no choice, he looked around the old-fashioned way.

Wheres the Star?

Gone, a new voice said. Dallion briskly turned round to see that Gleam was gone. In her place was a boy in his late teens with long straight hair, dressed in a knee-length tunic. Everything from his clothes to his eyes and hair were purple. The question is what to do with you.

Galatea,

Dallion thought. Hed seen the Purple Moon in the aetherbirds memories. Back then he looked different, but Moons tended to change appearance more often than ordinary people changed clothes.

Since Dallion didnt have the magic trait, he hadnt been able to read any specifics about the Moon. All he knew was that the deity was the patron of nymphs and the originator of magic itself. All practical information, especially spells, appeared like blank pieces of paper.

Some were impressed by your actions, the Moon went on. I dont. You could have won the battle ages ago, but you chose not to.

I still killed the Star. One of the positive things about Dallion being in his current state was that he didnt feel any fear, either. Someone that

nobles and armies have failed to achieve. Galatea interrupted. Even you dont believe that.

Hes not dead?

Oh, hes dead. This one.

Theres more than one Star?

Thinking back, Dallion had always wondered why there were different descriptors regarding the Star. Most referred to him as the Crippled Star or just the crippled. However, hed seen creatures created by the Twister Star as well as writing in the buried pyramid out south, referring to him as the Broken Star. That suggested that there were at least three, and yet everyone so far was convinced that there was just one or were they?

Just one at a time. Thats not the important question.

And whats that?

What do you plan on doing?

Dallion thought for a few moments.

Am I dead? he asked.

Yes.

That simplified things somewhat. This way he wouldn't be worried about everything in the world. It was still a pity that he didn't manage to pass the next awakening gate. He was curious what it would be like being a noble. Also, there was Euryale. Despite being deprived of all emotions right now, he still wished he could have spent more time with her, and not just a bit. In the end, he had done the same as her mentor had abandoned her just after promising he wouldn't.

You're also alive, the Moon added. Right now, you're like Schrodinger's cat, but it's no longer a theoretical matter.

Am I alive and dead?

And in a small box of magic. At such times, usually a path is chosen for you.

But since I'm an otherworlder I get to choose it myself?

No. The Moon shook his head. The coin was tossed, and you lost. That's why I intervened. I'm offering you the choice.

Why?

Magic is the trait of exceptions.

The explanation would have been enough a few weeks ago. Right now, though, Dallion could see there was more to it. The Moons never did anything without a reason. Even if they were selfish, watching others struggle and fight just for their amusement, they weren't in the habit of giving people options. If Galatea had the power and will to bring Dallion back to life, he would have just done so.

Why would you want to? I'm not your favored.

You have something that's mine.

Dallion felt even more confused.

My familiar, the Purple Moon clarified, eyes half closed. You have him and I want him back.

Aether? Won't he return to you after I die?

Normally, yes. If you kept him as a gem, he would have. But you used a Vermillion ring to put him in your realm. Since you're an otherworlder once you're gone, your realm goes with you and that includes him.

Was that why you wanted me to release you that badly? Dallion asked.

There was no answer. In this room, whatever it was, even Aether didn't have access.

Your first choice is to die. The lack of emotion of Galatea's part was made all the more ominous due to his calm angelic appearance. Everything will end, and you and Aether will be lost.

Not a good choice.

Your second choice is to make use of the skill gem hes become. My familiar will be released. Youll survive, and in the process gain my traits and the spellcraft skills.

Death or a skill. Looking at it like that, there didnt seem to be a downside. That was precisely why Dallion wasnt comfortable with it. When things were too good, they usually werent. If Aether was mad at the world before, after his brief imprisonment, he was probably seething with rage.

Releasing him might well mean the end of another era. Dallion would probably be fine, possibly all those close to him as well, but what about everyone else?

Is this an awakening trial? he asked. The choice felt too much like one. Two options: be happy or have everyone else in the world be happy, just not both.

Its a simple question. The Moon frowned.

Aether told me what hed do if released. You said that even if this Star is dead, another will appear.

It takes time for Stars to emerge. It took decades for the Twisted Star to emerge.

So, the world will be destroyed after decades?

Its just a choice, the Moon said again, his tone slightly annoyed. Those are your two options.

Choose one or dont. If you prefer staying here, deciding for eternity, I guess thats a third possibility. I told you which I prefer. Thats it.

Galatea was very different from the Green Moon. Given that he was linked to magic, Dallion had always imagined him more whimsical and goody. Instead, he was cold, arrogant, and unwilling to make any compromises. Even when he cared, he didnt seem to.

Can I talk to Aether before I decide?

No. You spoke to one familiar, thats enough.

Why am I hesitating? Dallion asked himself. The proper choice was to refuse. If he wanted the skill, he could have used the skill gem at any point after capturing the aetherbird. Being in this room made things less clear cut. It was good that the Moons had blocked all his emotions, or he would have chosen out of fear.

Dallion thought back as long as he could remember. Thanks to the value of his mind trait, he could recall everything from the day he came here with perfect clarity, even further back going to his early childhoodboth here and that on Earth. Everything considered, hed done more than one could hope for, more than they could even imagine. In true time, hed lived over a millennium. People would be fortunate to last a tenth of that. At the same time, there was so much more that awaited him. He could leave the province, leave the empire even, and spend the rest of his life hunting beasts in the wilderness along with Eury.

Can I make a request? Dallion took a step forward. If I choose to live, will you look after the world?

Were always looking after the world. For the first time, a fraction of the Moons mouth curved in a smile. Thats what the rules are for. Even the exceptions follow those.

So, you wont let Aether destroy the world?

Only if it doesn't need destroying. There've been few constants since the start of creation. As long as there's a Star, the era will end in war and chaos. Also, as long as there are otherworlders from Earth, there will always be a Star. If the only way to contain chaos is to start a new era, that's what we'll do.

You think I'll become the next Star?

Possible, but I hope not. You're more interesting than you are. So what's your decision?

Dallion's lips moved, voicing the answer. As he did, the sensation of pain shot through him, causing him to drop to the ground. All the sensations and emotions gone till moments ago suddenly returned, taking him back in the Stars temple. Arthur's body was there, smiling lifelessly a foot away. Melting void matter was everywhere, transforming all copied objects into tar.

Clutching his chest, Dallion felt the spike still there.

Great, he thought. Even after I made my choice, this is what I get?

You don't have a choice in this one, Nil said in a panicked voice. If you don't use the gem, you won't make it.

The Vermillion ring pulled away, only constructed by the chain round Dallion's neck.

Use it! Nil shouted.

Ignoring the pain, Dallion grabbed the ring.

Vermillion! he ordered, gripping it.

The skill gem within his realm emerged, filling his hand. Only one thing was left now.

Sorry Eury, Dallion thought. I'm not that strong, after all.

MAGIC TRAIT GAINED

The power of the PURPLE MOON now flows through you, allowing you to see and use magic at will.

SPELLCRAFT skills obtained

You now have the ability to craft spells.

SEVEN TRAITS

(+ Awakening, +1 Body, +1 Mind, +1 Reaction, +1 Perception, +1 Empathy, +1 Magic)

You've obtained all seven traits. Fancy that. You better not be greedy and obtain an eighth. Things won't go well if you do.

Purple light streaked out between Dallion's fingers. Within moments, it grew into a flame surrounding his hand. Purple wings sprouted, followed by a head and the elongated body of the aetherbird.

Without a sound, the creature flapped its wings, heading straight for the nearest wall, then passed through it. When Dallion opened the palm of his hand, only the ring remained.

Chapter 649: New Differences

The view was strange. Sitting on the top of the pyramid, Dallion stared at the horizon. The whole area was barren, even more so than the Fallen South. There were no plants, no animals, just rocky valleys and mountains. Maybe in the past it had been full of lush forests similar to the region east of Nerosal. Maybe in centuries it would become just that now that the void matter was gone.

That was the aetherbirds final act before disappearing: it had effectively purified the area, evaporating any remnant of void mattersolid or otherwise. As a result, all that was left of the unusual modern day structures was sky and the occasional pane of glass. Someone could make a fortune by coming here. Sadly, that person wasnt going to be Dallion.

Your friend from the Order sent you a message, Nil said, breaking the silence. Hannah got it for you. Apparently, its a few areas in which Star activity is suspected.

It was a little too late, but Dallion appreciated the gesture. At least there was someone in the Order with whom he was in good relations with.

Anything else? he asked.

Still nothing from Eury, although I do know that shes left Linatol, the old echo continued. She took all her gear, and its not related to a hunt request.

How do you know?

I have my ways, dear boy.

Dallion would have liked to be with her about now. The last few months had made him a realist, though. The best he could hope for was that shed gone to another province. Her relation to him, combined with the fact that she was a hunter, made her a target for either side. The way things were escalating between the countess and the archduke, more and more people were forced to pick sides. Everyone with links to both would be trusted by neither.

Everything will change, wont it?

The sun was setting beneath the horizon, but that wasnt what Dallion was looking at. Now that he had acquired the magic trait, even at such a lot level, made him see the world in a whole different light. Threads and puddles of color were all about, like awakening markers. The line that Aether had left was also present, slowly fading away like magical condensation trails.

Itll take a while getting used to, definitely. Though nothing to worry about.

Nothing to worry about. As Nil had explained, the Academy had a very strict policy when it came to new mages. Anyone with the trait was quickly approached and brought to the Academy, far from everyone else. On a logical level, Dallion could appreciate it. Since the vast majority of mages emerged during awakening, having a child with the ability to destroy buildings wasnt a terribly good idea. Taking them to a place where they could learn without harming themselves or others was a good thing overall, though not always for the people who were sent there. Dallion would have preferred a few weeks, or even days, to get a few things in order. He could have spent the time seeking out Eury, passing by his home village, or even made an attempt to secretly check on Gloria and Falkner. Instead, he was supposed to wait until the mage scouts reached him.

You know what, Dallion stood up. Im done waiting.

Thats not a good idea, dear boy. Making a bad first impression is not how you want to start your days at the Academy.

I wont run. Dallion looked straight up. All seven Moons had gathered. Felygn! he shouted. How about a little help getting me out of here?

Do you really think that will work? Nil asked with a sigh. Youve already been visited by one Moon today.

I dont need him to visit. Just to send Dark over, since Aether didnt bring me back to the known world.

Almost on queue a flash of green lightning ran through the cloudless sky, like a tear in reality. For a fraction of a second, the rip widened in one spot, allowing a green dragon to emerge.

Dallion took a step back. This wasnt his first time seeing a dragon. Dark, in particular, had spent quite some time with him, learning how to combat split properly. However, looking at a dragon through the eyes of magic was incomparable. The entire creature was glowing, created out of billions green threads of aether that encompassed his entire body. This was the difference between magic creatures and everything else. Normal creatures, even those with magical abilities, held the magic threads within them. Beings of pure magic, on the other hand, had the aether surround their physical bodies, making them seem at far larger. In this case, Dark was the size of his father.

Is that how mages see dragons?

Pretty much. We just know how to separate between the two, so the aura doesnt dazzle us as much. For sure, its one of the things youll need to get used to.

Just like everything else Dallion said beneath his breath.

Lux, stop trying to find me, Dallion said in his realm. Get back to where my clothes and Vihrogon are. Ill come find you.

Are you sure, boss? The firebird chirped. Im on the right path. I promise!

Its fine. Spend some time with Nox.

Sure! Big bro Nox has become pretty cool! He takes up a whole room now!

That was a compliment only Lux could come up with. Thinking about it brought a faint smile to Dallions face. If nothing else, at least his familiars remained the same as before; two of his familiars. In a way Gleam was also alright wherever she was.

How are you holding up, Ruby? Dallion asked.

The shardfly on his shoulder flicked its wings twice.

You dont need to come with me. I can find you a nice spot in the wilderness.

Is fine, the creature replied.

It too had become a familiar of sorts, only it was bound to the real world. That was a benefit in some aspects. Dallion only needed to constantly keep an eye on him to make sure nothing bad happened. It was an amusing notion. Back when he was still fighting to pass the second gate, shardflies especially ruby ones were seen as incredibly dangerous creatures. At Dallion's current level, Ruby was the most fragile companion he had.

It took Dark less than a minute to reach Dallion. The dragon didn't waste time showing off how much his combat splitting had improved. This time, Dallion let him. He still felt slightly exhausted after his fight.

Evening, teacher, Dark said in a highly polite fashion. His physical body had stopped about five feet from Dallion. His aura, on the other hand, was engulfing Dallion and a large part of the inverted pyramid. What do you think?

You've grown a bit.

Oh, yeah. I meant about the Splitting. I can maintain an instance ten seconds now.

That's more than me. Dallion took a step forward, patting Dark on the side of the head. You still need to work a bit on your frequency.

I know. That's on the list. Felygn never has time to teach me anything cool. I asked to become his familiar, but he just laughed and said I'm fine as I am.

A multitude of luminous threads around the dragon shifted color, displaying disappointment and determination.

Magic and music combine? Dallion asked.

Everything combines, dear boy. Didn't you learn that, already?

I guess I'm a slow learner, Dallion lied.

Why do you want to become his familiar? he asked the dragon.

Because it's cool? The Purple Moon has one, so I think I could be a good Felygn familiar.

Sometimes you can be so naive, Dallion thought as he climbed onto the dragon's back.

There was a lot more space now, making hanging on a bit of a challenge. Thankfully, Dark didn't mind Dallion grabbing hold of his back scales.

So, where to? Are we going to see Eury? I know where she is.

That was one benefit living in the realm of a Moon: one had the ability to see the entire world. Part of Dallion would have liked that, although he knew that it would be better for everyone if he postponed that. He'd already said everything there was in the message he'd sent from Nerosal. Seeing him in his current state, after everything he'd done, wasn't the best idea.

No. I just want you to tame me to a spot in the forest, and then I'll tell you where to go afterwards.

Oh, ok. More of the threads darkened with disappointment. The dragon attempted to split and try different conversation approaches with Dallion, but the moment he did, he got a tap on the back, causing the instances to fade away.

Not right now, Dark, Dallion said. Shell understand.

I know. I just thought itll be better for the both of you. Dark stretched his wings, then shot into the air. The speed was impressive, even if it still didnt match what Lux was capable of. From what Dallion gathered, it would be a few hours before he was back to the edge of Wetie province.

Normally, Dark would be quite chatty, given how long it had been since the two had seen each other. However, the dragon could sense that Dallion wasnt in the mood for talking, so it remained silent as well.

The reunification with Lux was an entirely different matter. When Dallion got back to the spot, hed buried his clothes and items, there was no stopping the firebird. Although Lux had been with Dallion when they had fought both the cultists and the Star himself, the familiar behaved as if theyd been miles apart. The entire time Dallion switched from what was left of the cultists clothes to his own, Lux kept on chirping, seeping compliments and asking questions. In the end it was Nox who had stepped in, growling at the firebird to cool it a little.

Once he was ready, and all his previous possessions were with him again, Dallion climbed on Darks back once more. This was going to be his final flight with the dragon, possibly for quite a while.

It was agreed that Dark would drop off Dallion several dozen miles from the mage village. Dragons and mages didnt mix well, so having them keep their distance from one another was a preferable solution.

The farewell was very respectful. Dark all but bowed in a display of respectno doubt something he had seen watching someone from the Moons realmthen turned around and flew off.

Do you think hes grown? Dallion asked, watching the dragon disappear into the sky.

If you have to ask yourself, then the answer is yes. I ask myself the same thing when I look at you.

Yeah. As much as Dallion had progressed, he still felt he hadnt grown as much as he wanted.

I know nows not the best time, but let me give you a few pieces of advice. For starters, forget all problems youve had so far. The countess, the archduke, even the order cant touch you now. The moment you walk into the mage village, youll be subject to a new set of rules.

I gathered as much.

However, theres a catch. No one will be willing to give you a chance. Youll have to put in a lot more effort than before to remain where you are, and twice as much to go forward. The academy also banishes people. Many will try to make you rogue. Dont let them.

I know. Im entering a whole different world and

No, not a different world, just one superimposed over what already exists. Being a mage wont take what youve achieved. Youll still be a hunter, but can even explore items if you wish. The difference is that no one outside the academy can force you. Youre spinning two plates from here on. The truth to surviving and getting what you want is not to let any of them drop.

Thanks, Nil, but Id like to follow my own advice for a while. Dallion went through the forest. He had no idea what changes the magic trait would bring, but he wasnt going to let stop him achieve what he had set his mind on. The fight with the Star had shown him there was a lot more to this

world that was hidden. Now that the Star was gone, and he had obtained all seven traits, he was going to find a way to look beneath the surface. And he planned to do so with Euryale by his side.

Chapter 650: New Rules

Shell be difficult to track, the hunter said. You cant sneak up on a gorgon. Also, she sounds like someone who wouldnt be found unless she wants to.

Dallion nodded. He was fortunate enough to have stumbled on another hunter in the mage village. The man was a veteran from the north with a permanent contract to the Academy. From what he had explained, the war was causing increasing disruptions in the northern provinces to the point that the Academy preferred to do their creature research in the local enclave.

Having spent his time exclusively in the southern part, Dallion still found it difficult to believe that the Tamin Empire could be anything but victorious, but apparently reality thought otherwise. While the Wetie province enjoyed relative calmoother than the internal conflict between Countess Priscord and Archduke Lanitoland had even acquired a few new territories, other provinces had gone on the defensive.

It wont be a priority mission, though. Ill keep an eye out when Im doing other things.

As long as you give me regular news. Dallion nodded. None of the local mages had officially said anything, but he had the feeling that in a few days hed be moved to some place closer to the Academy. It also helped that the dryad items kept being gossipy as always.

An echo item, then.

I dont have enough to pay you now, but the hunters in Lanitol will tell you Im good for it.

Kid, youre a mage now. The veteran cracked a smile. Youre more than good for it. Are you sure, though? This is the sort of thing that can become expensive really fast.

That was a good question. Did Dallion have to search for Euryale? The gorgon was smart enough to see the political implications before they happened. It was entirely possible that she had hired someone to search for him as well; and given the recent development, Dallion wouldnt be difficult to find.

Im sure, Dallion said, firmly.

Youre the client. The veteran adjusted his backpack, then tossed a metal ring to Dallion. The way he did suggested that this wasnt the first time hed had to leave echo items behind. A personal piece of advice. Dont spend too much time talking to my echo. Its unlikely Ill find anything for the next few months.

Ill try. Dallion put the ring on his left pinky finger. May the Moons be with you.

Thanks, kid. The hunter turned around and made his way to the village gate.

Dallion kept on looking until the man disappeared from view. With that, his old life effectively came to an end. For the moment, there was no one else he could tell of his ascension to magehood. The personal conflict between him and Countess Priscord made it unwise to attract attention to himself. And even if that wasnt the case, Dallion wasnt sure what to say exactly.

It'll be fine, Nil said from within Dallions awakening realm. News will spread like wildfire, if it hasn't already. New mages are always a big deal. A late bloomer such as yourself is quite extraordinary. The last time it occurred was during the early days of the empire.

Yeah, Dallion whispered.

Close to a week had passed since the Star had been defeated. Dallions condition had improved significantly. Thanks to the mages efforts, the permanent pain effect had been removed, though the bleeding was still there. Mage Eleria had managed to reduce it significantly, but confessed that only time or a bishop of the Order of the Seven Moons could remove it completely.

Dal, Lalandra, the village scribe, rushed to him. Not that he had acquired the magic trait, her attitude towards him had changed significantly. The chief wants to see you.

Be on your guard, dear boy, Nil said. Sounds like Eleria will call in her favors.

You say that each time she calls for me.

She's a mage. Mages only call people when they want something from them. I would know.

Dallion didn't respond. The creator of the echo was indeed a mage, although he had been outcast by the Academy and banished to Nerosal. Neither the old echo, nor the man, had shared any further details, and Dallion never asked.

Lets go, he said, then started his way towards the administrative building of the enclave.

The structure remained the largest in the village, rising four floors high and maintained to perfection. In the past, Dallion thought that the buildings domain was maintained daily. Now, thanks to his magic vision, he could see that wasn't the case. The walls were no different from those of any structure he'd seen, except for the fact that they were covered with intricate rune patterns. It wasn't so much an illusion as a shift of reality. Nil had tried to explain it, but all Dallion could compare it with was combat splitting of a building in which only the best version was brought to reality.

The scribe opened the door for him, accompanying him through the labyrinth of stairways and corridors until they arrived at the mages floor.

Good luck, Lalandra said with her usual smile. I'll be waiting for you here.

Thanks.

Dallion went up to Elerias door, then, with a polite knock, stepped inside. The room was exactly how he remembered it, only much brighter. Purple colors emanated from all books, making the bookshelf like an eighties disco. Even the mages desk and furniture were magic infused. When Dallion was told that mages see the world in a different fashion, he thought it was more of a metaphor. As it turned out, the phrase was quite literal. Looking beyond the physical aspect, Dallion could see an entirely different style. The chairs and desk were a lot more intricate with magic lines curving into decorative doodles, reminding Dallion of French Baroque.

Still getting used to the sight? the mage asked, seated on an ornate chair that looked like a throne through mana vision. I remember it took me a while as well. I was very confused back then.

Were you a child when it happened?

There was that too, but as you've seen magic awakening isn't like the normal kind. The weirdness spills in the real world as one of my teachers used to say. That aside, I have some news. You'll be going to the Academy tomorrow.

Finally! So soon? Dallion asked.

It took them a while to prepare things for you. You are an unusual case, which leads me to a few things. You'll be taught the basics there, but before that, there are a few things you need to know. For starters, don't level up.

Dallion froze. He was so close to the next awakening gate. Thanks to the achievement of defeating the Twister Star, he had only three more levels till eighty. Respectively, all doors in his domain except for three had vanished.

Why?

Magic is a different trait.

I've been hearing that a lot lately.

And you'll hear more. There's a reason the Purple Moon is considered special.

The same was said about the Green Moon, Dallion thought.

For one thing, magic is envious. Each time you level up your magic trait decreases. Of course, you can compensate for the difference by advancing the trait itself, but that becomes pointless, especially after passing the second gate.

That explained why Nil had been so insistent he rested before attempting any more awakening trials. The old echo was looking out for him, while unable to share the real reason.

There's no practical point leveling up over twenty. Many don't even go that far. Achievements can make up for the difference.

I was told there are no magic achievements. Other than killing a Star or its echoes.

Ah. Magic advancement is different.

Dallion struggled not to roll his eyes.

You can increase it without leveling up. For example.

The mage drew a series of symbols in the air. Dallion was able to see the trails of magic her finger left, as if she were drawing with a light pen in the air. Once the circle was complete, two glasses appeared on the table. Moments later, an expensive-looking decanter joined them.

Assume that this, Eleria removed the stopper of the decanter is the amount of effort you have in your lifetime. You can use it to improve your level, she poured in one of the glasses, or your magic, but never both at once.

Dallion wasn't sure whether that was meant to be a serious lesson, or Eleria just wanted a drink. Still, it did make a bit of sense. Cautiously, he took his glass and sipped. Bitterness filled his mouth, quickly dissolving into a bouquet of tastes and fragrances.

Awakening is found within, the mage continued after taking a sip of her glass. Magic is found in the world. That's why mages always roam about. No one can fully predict where the next trial would appear. You'll be told more on the matter at the Academy.

No leveling up. At least initially. Can I sacrifice magic levels for normal ones?

You can do whatever you want. I'd advise you not to until you have a good grasp of basic magic principles. There were a few who thought as you did and they ended up exhausting their trait.

Chills ran down Dallion's spine. There was a chance he could lose his magic through ignorance? If he had persisted in leveling up, he could have lost through greed that he had gained through such expense. And judging by her expression, that had happened before.

Cleric lied to me, Dallion thought.

Most likely, yes, Nil admitted. I expect the name erasure was done as a sort of mercy. Losing your magic through greed and stupidity isn't easily forgotten. No wonder he had to join the Order. No one else would have him.

Did you know him?

No, but my original might have. Such failures are rare and remembered for a long time, even if no one talks about them.

That would explain a lot. Could it also be the reason that Cleric was an albino?

Never ask him that, Nil warned. It'll be the same as asking someone how they got their powers sealed. The difference is that there's no way to unseal magic. Once you lose it, it's forever.

Does that disturb you? the mage asked.

No, Dallion lied.

Finally, don't accept any duels until you get your trait to ten. Personally, I'd say forever, but at level ten you'll be able to make up your own mind.

Are they to the death? Dallion let out a polite chuckle.

No, they'll just cost time. A duel is a way to shift magic trait levels. The winner takes a level from the loser. The Moon doesn't allow anyone to lose their magic completely, but you might be stuck at level one for the rest of your life.

I can always make up for it.

Sure you can, but the effort required will always increase. Losing magic levels doesn't decrease the difficulty of the next.

I see what you mean.

The example with the glasses was a bit deeper than it seemed. The decanter was also illustrating a point. Either that, or Dallion was overthinking things.

Finally, theres one small matter Id like to discuss.

Dallion nodded, taking another sip of his drink. It was clear by the bouquet of aromas that it had to be insanely expensive. More than likely, he wouldnt get offered more in the near future.

I want you to level up this village to a town.

The request almost made Dallion drop his glass in shock. Not only was the request extreme, but it was also made in such a calm fashion that someone would think it was a matter of improving a pocket knife.

No need to look so surprised. Youre a high enough level for it. Besides, as a hunter and Hero of Nerosal, it should be easy.

Easy isnt the right word Dallion said beneath his breath. If I do that, itll make me the owner of the area.

So? No one here will be bothered. In fact, youll be doing us a service. Weve been asking this place to be improved for a while, and both the countess and the archduke are dragging their feet. Since they know that the Academy cant take sides in internal conflicts, their interest in the matter is somewhat lacking.

What did I tell you? Nil grunted. Mages. Cant trust them as far as you can cast them.

You that both of them hate my guts, right? Dallion remained uncertain how to proceed.

Were not waiting for approval, Dal. We just need someone to actually do the job. Paying mercenaries is troublesome. And mages tend to be too low level for that.

Didnt magic make up for that?

It does, but as an exception, it also cant improve things. If that werent the case, there'd be mage cities all over the world. As powerful as magic is, its ability to modify the physical world is limited.

It was starting to sound eerily similar to the Stars void abilities.

Since youre one of us now, the Academy wont have anything against if you help out.

Nothing against, eh? Dallion thought. What about me?