

Leveling up 651

Chapter 651:

AREA AWAKENING

The village and the surrounding forest disappeared, replaced by a series of flat hills and abrupt mountains. If everything was a bit redder, one thing he was near the Grand Canyon back on Earth.

You are in the land of CANOPA

Defeat the guardian to change the lands destiny

A sense of nostalgia went through Dallion. It had been a while since he'd improved anything major. Even item improvements were done merely as an afterthought in order to develop his skills.

Almost immediately, blue flames enveloped Dallion. His firebird familiar was all too eager to go out on an adventure, especially since he could stretch his wings in the awakened realms. For once, it was Dallion who was less enthusiastic.

Summing his harpsisword and armadil shield, Dallion looked around. Normally it would take weeks for one to find the location of the area guardian. It was a slow process that involved a lot of scouting and fighting local creatures.

Feel any cracklings, Nox? Dallion asked

A large black puma emerged a step away from him. The creature yawned, stretched, then took a few sleep steps forward.

A few, it replied. Do we have to chase them?

That was a good question. Improving the realm to a hundred percent normally didn't provide any benefit. There was a slight chance that Dallion might receive some minor achievement, boosting a trait by two points, but the effort would be incomparably high. Area cracklings rarely grouped together. The village, while not in terrible condition, was stitched up with magic, meaning that there were plenty of crackling settlements about.

Why don't I see any magic? Dallion asked.

Your level is too low, Nil replied. In time, you will.

Were't mages supposed to see things differently?

Usually, yes. The echo didn't give any further explanations. Most likely, once again, it was in the Ihavenoidea category.

Lux, let's do some hunting. Nox, you can pass if you like.

That was more than enough for the puma to disappear back into Dallion's realm and curl up to nap. It was a mystery where all the energy it had as a kitten had vanished. The firebird, on the other hand, let out a loud chirp of joy. Wings of flames emerged from Dallion's back, lifting him up in the sky. From there, he was thrust forward in a random direction.

It didn't take long for the first crackling settlement to be spotted. Knowing what to do, Lux slowed down, then came to a stop about a mile from it, still keeping Dallion in the air. It was at this point that Dallion finally saw the first signs of magic in the realm. A thin layer of blowing magenta surrounded the cracklings hamlet like a bubble. It very much reminded of the barrier that had been cast around the city of Lanitol during the poison plague. One could assume that in a similar fashion, the barrier didn't allow cracklings to pass through.

So, that's the trick? he mused out loud. Looked a lot more impressive in the real world.

That's because you know how it works. After a few years at the Academy, you'll start hating magic like the rest of us.

Dallion took no notice. Instead, he summoned his harpsisword, then infused spark in a point attack aimed at the settlement.

Raw force, glowing with the intensity of a falling star, ripped the sky. It passed through the magic barrier as if it were paper, then continued onwards, dealing destruction to anything it touched. The black flame composing the settlement was snuffed out, along with many of the nearby structures and the black gremlins living there. A few moments later, all that was left was the rickety outer wall.

That's one way of doing things, I guess. Nil didn't sound particularly impressed.

The enemies had no chance whatsoever. Due to the magic barrier, they weren't even in a position to escape the lethal attack, rendering the entire experience no different from popping a pimple.

Realm section mended!

Overall completion 83%

The level of realm decay was rather high, a lot more than Dallion would have thought. Back in Neorsal, the city frequently hired guilds to keep buildings and entire neighborhood areas in good condition. The term for such work was sanitation, and despite paying well, it was avoided by anyone who could get away with it.

Do you plan on cleaning the entire village, dear boy?

Why not? At least it was going to give Dallion something to do. Also, the completionism within him was already craving for the hundred percent. Let's find the next one, Lux.

Finding all crackling settlements, even with the firebirds speed, proved to be a considerable chore. Sizes varied. Some settlements were as large as small towns, while others were little more than a camp with a dozen cracklings nearby. Each one had to be destroyed in order for the completion to reach the coveted maximal level.

By the time Dallion got to ninety-nine, evening had fallen within the realm. Unable to spot cracklings even with his perception trait, he decided to pause for a bit of rest. All the point attacks he had been doing had caused his arms to ache.

You seem to be enjoying yourself, the armadil shield said. Maybe you've missed your vocation.

Very funny. Dallion lay down on his back, looking at the three Moons shining above. For some reason, the majority of them were absent. The Purple Moon took a central position, while the Blue and White Moons stayed on the edge of the sky. Cocoon me, if anything approaches.

All the cracklings are caged in magic barriers. What do you expect will approach?

The guardians. Dallion closed his eyes.

While each realm had a guardian that represented it, large area realms were different. In addition to the main guardian that represented the area itself, there also were a number of smaller key guardians. Defeating enough of them was often enough to claim dominants of the area. However, the only certain level to increase the level of a city was to defeat the settlement guardian.

The rest was long and pleasant. The death of the Star had taken with him most of Dallions concerns, allowing him to actually enjoy sleep. There were no more nightmares, no sensation that he was late or not doing enough, just a pleasant snooze. Food was the only thing missing. Being in a realm, Dallion had to put up with the persistent sensations of thirst and hunger, though hopefully not for long.

The second day was spent crackling hunting again. Achieving the final percent was a lot more annoying than one might expect. In twelve hours, Dallion had destroyed fifteen cracklings camps, and the number had remained unchanged. Seeing the problem, he had resorted to help from Nox in finding the last pockets of creatures. By evening, over two dozen more camps were destroyed and still the overall completion remained at ninety-nine.

Any advice, Nil? Dallion asked.

Finding cracklings isnt something Im particularly good at, dear boy.

What about finding magic? All of them are patched up, so if I find the source of magic, Ill also find the cracklings.

Thats a simplistic way of thinking. There are many things that can have magic. But, yes, theres a way for you to find magic. Its just not very intuitive.

Im all ears.

Combine layer vision with magic vision.

Come on, Nil. Thats one of the first things I tried.

Yes, but you tried it wrong. You keep thinking in terms of the real world. Magic is self-contained. There arent lines connecting each dome to the rest. Rather, imagine it as density. Everything in this realm contains magic, just in so insignificant amounts that its difficult to see. If you focus and go high enough, you should be able to see the presence of magic throughout the terrain.

Like the elevation indication on a map, Dallion said.

Ill take your word for it. Whenever you destroy a barrier, the magic emanating from it fades, which will make other areas brighter. Be warned, though, since youre new at this, its likely to cause headaches pretty soon.

Lets go, Lux.

The sun had long set in the realm, but judging by the explanation, Dallion didnt need light for this to work. Magic was the only light source he needed.

After reaching a height of several miles, Dallion concentrated.

At first, nothing happened. There was nothing but blackness beneath him. Gradually, though, shades began to emerge. It was barely noticeable, as if someone had added a drop of color to a bucket of ink, but thanks to his magic vision, it was visible. Then, the pain came; not the usual tension in the temples or the headaches. This felt as if the inside of his head was burning.

Started already?

Nil asked. *I expected you to last at least a few seconds more. I guess since youve never had any training, youre well behind.*

Dallion tried to maintain the image longer, but his body trait proved useless. The hues suddenly vanished as if someone had turned out the electricity.

Its gone, he said, closing his eyes. Unfortunately, the pain continued.

Dont worry. Youll be able to try again in about ten minutes. Half an hour at most. After your headaches gone, try again. Just be sure its completely gone.

By the sound of things, it really did sound like the effects of electricity. When flimsy wires got overheated, it took a while for them to cool down enough before using them again. In this case, Dallion was the equivalent of a thin wire. Until his magic trait increased, or he got used to the sensation, he was going to have to use this ability in short bursts.

Using the downtime to change location, Dallion then tried to use his magic vision again. This time hed managed to see enough of color in the blackness to indicate the direction of a magic source. Not waiting for the pain to increase, he stopped focusing and flew in the respective direction.

Soon enough, the orc camp came into view, like a flowing pearl in the darkness. One swift attack later, the pearl was gone.

Realm fully mended!

The village of CANOPA is now flawless.

Thank the Moons it was just one, Dallion thought.

He wouldnt have managed if there were many more. This was the point at which he was supposed to go back down and get some rest. Curiosity pushed him to try and use magic layer vision once again.

There were no expectations. Dallion only wanted to confirm that everything was as the blue rectangle had said it was. To his surprise, the magic in the land hadnt completely subsided. The spot of the camp was completely black, but there was a faint purplish tint mixed to the darkness in the direction of the east.

What the heck?

Lux, go there! Dallion ordered.

The further east Dallion went, the brighter the purple became. Even when the magic headache returned, Dallion pushed himself more, determined to find the unexpected source. Before he could, a red rectangle emerged in front of him.

COMBAT INITIATED

Green cones emerged from the ground, surrounding Dallion from two sides. These were guard markers, indicating the area of potential attacks to come. It had been a while since Dallion had to rely on these to warn him of an attack.

Shield, expand! he ordered, splitting into two dozen instances.

All the instances attempted to fly out of the green cones. More than half of them failed to, burned to cinders midair by a wave of purple flames.

Magic? Dallion asked. Splitting into a new set of instances. Excluding the Purple Moons familiar, this was the first case in which he'd encountered a guardian using spells.

What do you expect, dear boy? Nils tone hardened. This has been a mage village for some time. Even guardians pick up new skills under certain conditions.

Chapter 652: Taste of Magic

Where the hell is it? Twenty instances of Dallion shot bolts into the darkness. No red rectangles emerged.

At this distance even the blue flames weren't able to illuminate the terrain sufficiently for the guardian to become visible. All that Dallion had to go by were the guard marker cones.

Seconds later, another burst of purple flames flew his way. Dallion didn't even bother to evade using the armadil shield to block the attack. Immediately after, he split again and shot in the general direction from where the flame had originated.

The guardian must be moving, Nil said.

You think?! Dallion snapped. It was obvious that the guardian was moving and doing so quite fast. While it was tempting to attribute that to magic, there was no such indication. Spells would have allowed Dallion to see the entity and not have to rely on guesswork.

It was all out annoying how much the lack of senses affected the outcome of a battle. If Dallion was only missing his sight, that wouldn't be such an issue. He'd been in similar situations in the wilderness. There, sound and smell made up for it, allowing him not only to determine the position of his opponents but also bring him victory. Here, it was as if the guardian didn't exist.

Nox, go down there and find it! Dallion ordered.

As things stood, this was the most absurd stalemate he had gotten himself into. It seemed that neither could defeat the other, though for different reasons. The guardian lacked the ability to strike all of Dallion's instances simultaneously, while Dallion was incapable of pinpointing a target.

The puma emerged, leaping out to the darkness below, then disappeared completely out of sight.

Unsummoning the bladebow, Dallion grabbed his harpsisword and played a series of chords. Sounds filled with overconfidence and rage filled the air in an attempt to target the invisible attacker.

Why cant I see any emotions? Dallion wondered.

He hadnt had a one on one with a village guardian in a long time, but he was more than confident that he could win with his current set of skills. The magic was the one huge unknown. Given how it transformed mediocre awakened into killing machines that three high-level awakened had difficulty against, it could potentially do the same to an area guardian.

Can it be invisible? Dallion asked.

Most definitely. You dont need to know spellcraft for that. Thats basic elemental manipulation.

Dallion was afraid of that answer. Not only was the guardian fast and able to spray fire, but turn invisible as well.

Lux, bring me down, he said. A foot above the ground.

To be on the safe side, he burst into a wave of instances. There was no telling whether the guardian couldnt manipulate the terrain as well.

Found anything, Nox? Dallion switched the way he was holding the harpsisword.

Nope, the familiar replied.

Two more waves of fire were launched at Dallion as he made his descent. Some of them evaporated a few of his instances, but overall, the attacks were harmless. They managed to confirm one thing, though: the guardian was definitely on the ground.

If thats the way you want it. Holding his breath, Dallion swung his weapon, doing a spark infused line attack.

This time, there was a result. The glowing thread went onwards into the darkness, when suddenly part of it vanished.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

A blob of darkness shattered like the shell of an egg, revealing the outline of a figure.

CANOPA VILLAGE GUARDIAN

Species: RUNE GOLEM

Class: STONE & AIR

Health: 45%

Traits:

- BODY 40

- MIND 50

- PERCEPTION 20

- REACTION 50

- **MAGIC 5**

Skills:

- **GUARD**

- **ATTACK**

- **ATHLETICS**

- **ACROBATICS**

- **ELEMENTAL CONTROL (Species Unique)**

- **STONE SHIELD (Species Unique)**

Weakness: EYES

A white rectangle emerged for a moment before vanishing again. It wasn't much, but enough for Dallion to get an idea what he was fighting against.

Of course it would be a golem, he thought.

Having the eyes be the weak spot was somewhat unexpected. He'd have assumed that tendons or joints would be a better candidate. Seeing that the guardian had more magic than Dallion was slightly concerned, as were the value of the other traits. Then again, if it were easy to defeat a village guardian, the mages would have done it by now.

If he doesn't know spellcraft, how can he use spells? Dallion asked, heading in the direction he'd seen the guardian.

I can't tell you that, Nil said with an audible chuckle. Clearly there is a way, otherwise you wouldn't be facing magic flames or invisibility.

Nil, sometimes you really are annoying.

Dallion stopped, then spread out with his instances. No attacks followed on the guardian's part, prompting Dallion to do another line attack of his own. Sadly, no new rectangles emerged. More than likely, the guardian had used his acrobatic skills to leap over the thread of destruction. Brute strength wasn't going to be the solution here. Although, one more line attack was all that it took to grant Dallion the win.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion concentrated, using magic layer vision once more. The color of magic was a lot more vibrant around him, but that wasn't all. This close to the ground, Dallion was able to see the lines of magic, like underground streams. He also saw them be scooped up and thrown at him in the form of flames.

That's what elemental control is? He asked as a third of his instances were incinerated.

When he'd initially seen Cleric do magic, he had mistaken them for spells. He couldn't be further from the truth. The magic trait simply allowed a person to extract magic already in the world and transform it into something basic. The only reason it had seemed so mysterious was because, until

recently, he wasn't able to spot all the magic sources around him. Now that he could, the mystery was no more. Also, it gave him an idea.

Ignoring the burning sensation in his brain, Dallion dashed to the nearest magic stream and reached out for it. The only thing more peculiar than physically grabbing magic was the soft and flaming sensation that came with it. The closest thing Dallion could compare it was like grabbing a worm of boiling jelly. The intensity made him instantly drop it. For the time being, it was safer to stick to magic.

MINOR STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 10%

A red rectangle suddenly appeared.

Thanks to the successful line attack not too long ago, Nox had managed to spot the guardian and had gone on the offensive. The void nature of the puma allowed it to claw through the invisibility bubble and into the golem's arm. It wasn't much of a blow, but it did its part. More importantly, it provided Dallion with the information he needed to do a targeted point attack.

Get out of there! Dallion ordered, as he thrust the harpsisword forward.

Purple sparks burst from the ground, culminating in a loud blast.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 200%

The guardian came into view, along with its white rectangle. Looking closely, Dallion saw that its health had only gone down by ten percent. Considering the amount of damage he had done with his last attack, the only conclusion he could reach was that the golem was able to heal itself as well. Normally, that would be a bad thing, but Dallion had enough experience to know exactly how to react in such situations: go on an unrelenting all-out attack.

The first thing he did while the guardian was still visible was to play a series of chords on his harpsisword. With the invisibility gone, the golem's emotions were easy to see, like large blobs within its body.

A connection formed. The golem was too strong to be immobilized by the effect of music itself, but not enough to reject the doubt and weight that was put into him through the melody. Breaking into a dash, Dallion kept on playing, all the time moving closer and closer. Then he switched hold and lunged forward with his weapon.

Sensing danger, the guardian leapt in the air. This time, no point attack followed. Instead, Dallion leapt up along with the golem.

Art attack

, Dallion thought.

The tip of his blade pierced through parts of the guardian's arms and torso, moving back as if Dallion was sewing. Red rectangles appeared, stacking one over the other. Each did the smallest amount of damage, but taken together, they continuously decreased the golem's health.

Surrender, Dallion said, switching to a multi-attack.

Slabs of stone emerged from the guardians body, shielding him from any attacks. Tapping his sword, Dallion sliced through them like butter, continuing with his attacks.

Surrender, Dallion said again. I know your pattern.

The guardians health was at ten percent now. Surrender was the logical thing to do, yet the golem stubbornly persisted, fighting a losing battle mid-air. The outcome was obvious, but just to make certain, Dallions last strike was a point attack right in the guardians chest.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 1000%

With a fraction of a second, the guardian burst into a cloud of sand. As he did, the realms night abruptly came to an end, and the sun emerged in the middle of the sky.

CANOPA level increased

CANOPA has been improved to TOWN

Dallion landed on the ground. Breathing heavily, he still looked around, as if expecting another attack.

Well done, dear boy! Nil congratulated him. Now, that wasnt so hard, was it?

For several seconds, Dallion just stood there, unsure how to reply. An achievement would have been nice, as would have been a rectangle, confirming him as the areas new owner. He knew that to be the case the realm felt similar to his own awakening realm. Dallion knew the location of everything in it, including the guardians. At the same time, he could shake the hollow feeling that went through him.

Dal? Nil asked. Is anything the matter?

I thought it would feel more fulfilling. Dallion replied.

A lot of things in life rarely do. You can admire your new realm if you wish. Maybe that will cheer you up?

Im not feeling down. Dallion unsummoned all his weapons. I guess I dont know what I expected. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the village had changed. For one thing, the place seemed a lot newer. The magic patches were gone, replaced by flawless walls and buildings.

The change took a while to get used to and not only for Dallion. Mages were looking about as well, trying to deal with the massive dj vu that had befallen them.

Maybe next time, dont mend settlements, Nil advised. Its less awkward that way.

Bravo. Dallion heard clapping from the direction of the administrative buildings. Mage Eleria was standing in front of the entrance where she wasnt just a split second ago. Now well finally be able to build a few more animal pens.

It was obvious to everyone that she wouldnt be the one doing the actual building, but Dallion nodded nonetheless.

And you even mended the town, the mage added. Outstanding. It didnt present a challenge, I trust?

No, it didnt. You knew what you were getting me into, didnt you?

Improving the village was done very much for Elerias benefit, but at the same time, it had also shown Dallion a few things regarding magicthings that no doubt she was unable to share.

Good. Well, you better have some food and rest. Youll be heading towards the capital first thing tomorrow.

Lanitol? Dallion blinked. I thought I was going to the Academy.

The Imperial Capitol. Thats where the Academy is located. I strongly suggest you keep in mind everything we discussed earlier. Also, learn the rules as quickly as possible. The next time we meet will be under very different circumstances. Dont forget that. The sudden sternness in her voice suggested that he had been given a lot of leeway until now. Whatever he was doing wrong wouldnt be tolerated for much longer.

I will. Thank you, mage.

Youre very welcome, dear boy. Do your best. I hope to see you again in a few years.

Chapter 653: Trip in a Box

Hey, make some room, a plump apprentice said to Dallion.

Judging by his appearance, magic or not, Dallion could take him out with one punch. When it came to the Academy, though, the man was still considered a superior. Since he was in his twenties, it was likely that the man would never move beyond the apprentice level. As Nil suggested, either the apprentices magic limit was lazy, his magic limit was low, or he had lost enough duels to keep him at this level.

Sure. Dallion moved further in.

As it turned out, the way to the Academy was via carriage, but not the sort Dallion had seen before. A wooden box would suit the contraption a lot better. There were no windows, no comfort, not even horses to pull it, just two seats on the inside and one outside. From what Nil had explained, the carriage was used to transport mages from poor sections of society to the Academy. The common explanation was that it was to keep all unbecoming away from the gaze of the inhabitants of the imperial capital. In reality, it was merely a security measure. No one simply went to the capital without an invitation or permit. Awakened with the magic trait were the only exceptions, though there were a few conditions attached. This was one of them.

You dont get seasick, right? The apprentice glared at Dallion.

Not particularly.

Better not puke on me.

Dallion considered making a snarky comment about him flying more than the apprentice ever would. It would certainly put the man in his place. Then again, creating a bad impression early on was sure to make his life a lot more complicated. Hed already done a good job of insulting several nobles. Keeping cool was the best strategy for the moment. At least until he rose to a high enough mage rank.

Ill do my best.

A few minutes later, the only door of the carriage was closed. Light was provided by a single white light crystal crudely put on the ceiling. It was bright enough for a person to read, which was what the apprentice immediately started doing.

Using a few instances, Dallion glances at the contents of the scroll, hoping it would be a spell manual or some kind. To his disappointment, it turned out to be an adventure story of questionable literary quality. Sometimes having high scholarly skills was also a curse. For one thing, finding a palpable work of fiction was more difficult than finding adequate food.

The carriage rocketed, reminding Dallion of the sensation he felt while cocooned in his armadil shield.

Well be flying, he whispered.

No, the apprentice corrected. The box will be flying. Well just be in it.

A typical pedantic answer of someone who wasnt good in magic.

How long will it take to get there?

A day, give or take. Ive brought some more scrolls if you want to pass the time.

Thanks, but I think Ill take a nap.

Suit yourself.

There was no point in trying to spark a conversation, so Dallion didnt even try. Instead, he concentrated on his magic vision. The color of magic had progressively faded since first acquiring it. From what Nil had explained, that was normal for late bloomers. Initially, his senses had been on overdrive, but after his body had gotten used to the experience, his magic sense had faded to its current level. Hed still be able to see what non-mages couldnt, but never as bright as before, unless he increased his trait level.

What happens to those who cant become mages? Dallion asked.

You have nothing to worry about, dear boy. As long as you dont engage in reckless duels, you have a very good chance of becoming one in a few years.

Im asking in general.

If you cant become a mage, you remain an apprentice. Simple as that. It might sound insignificant, but an apprentice mage is still a force to be reckoned with. The stories about apprentices causing havoc in cities are only popular because they are true. In addition to the Academys support, they can also deal with most awakened, city guards included. There is one catch, however.

Dallion leaned back, trying to make himself as comfortable as possible. In this world, there always was a catch. Just most of the time it was presented as a rule.

Apprentices arent allowed to be on their own. Some assist mages, though most serve the tower. Its not a bad life. Better than being a servant in most noble families.

Its still servitude.

Thats life, sadly. Theres always the option to give up your magic. In the history of the academy thereve only been two that have. That and going rogue, though for that you need some level of skill. Being an apprentice means you dont have it.

This was the point at which Dallion was starting: talentless. It was going to be a long climb to get to anywhere substantial. However, he had a plan. All he needed was to boost his magic trait to five, then he could level up to eighty. Losing three levels was an acceptable price, especially since he would gain a lot more past the awakening gate.

The trip went through stages. The first stage was the curiosity stage, during which he followed every sound the carriage made, in the hopes of figuring out where he was flying through. That ended in less than ten minutes, leading to the speculation stage. Left with nothing to do, Dallion attempted to learn as much as possible about the academy from Nil. The old echo, unfortunately, either gave obvious answers or avoided the topic entirely.

After an hour of attempts came the boredom stage. Dallion made a few attempts to sleep, but each time hed wake up after a few hours, only to be told they were nowhere near the Academy itself. After the third attempt, he did the only foolproof option available: resort to using music.

Whats the Imperial Capital like? he asked, his voice full of joy and agreeableness.

Normally, the apprentice would grumble some answer, then get back to reading. This time, he slid a finger along the scroll, leaving a line of magiclikely a magic bookmarkertthen rolled it up.

Large, the man said. Larger than anything else in the world. There are provinces less big. If youre asking whether Ive been in the imperial district, then the answer is no.

Why not?

Only nobles and mages go there. There was an unmistakable note of envy in his voice. Well, that and anyone the imperial family fancies inviting. I dont know the last time thats happened. Not that Id be invited either way.

Why not?

Get real.

Hierarchy is very strict, dear boy. Youll learn more once you arrive.

You said that already, Dallion sighed mentally.

Whats being an apprentice like?

It has its moments. Worst they could do is send you to an enclave. Thank the Moons they made me part of your travel escort. With luck, Ill never go back to that wretched place!

The man had all the earmarks of a city kit. He probably was used to the bustle of a dense urbanized area and didnt appreciate the wilderness, or manual work, too much. His sharp tongue made it obvious he hadnt been in a serious fight in his life, otherwise hed be a bit more cautious. A constant hum of fear emanated from him as he spoke.

The conversation quickly devolved from there, turning into a complaint fest. It was astounding how isolated the Academy was from the rest of the world. Neither the brewing internal conflicts in the

Wetie province, nor the Empires war, were mentioned at all. The only thing that mattered was allegiances and shifts of power within the Academy itself. For an apprentice, it was by far more important to know which mage to support, else they would risk being sent to less prominent environments, or even enclaves. Thankfully, among the heaps of trash, there were a few nuggets of information that Dallion managed to obtain. For starters, upon his arrival at the Academy, he was going to be made a novice and have a magic seal placed on him. Novices were the lowest rank of mages who were considered a threat to themselves and others. Thus, they were only allowed to perform spells in certain areas of the Academy and nowhere else.

After learning the basics, novices were expected to unseal themselves, at which point theyd earn the title apprentice. It was from that point that the spell techniques came into play. In terms of parallels, if novice-hood could be said to be elementary school, apprenticeship went all the way to the end of high school. All apprentices who rose up the ranks and made it to the end, were allowed to hold a mage trial, granting them the right to leave the Academy and start working for a patron, or continue with their studies and become a driving force within the mage academia.

Two things were certain: sooner or later, a mage always made it to the apprentice level, though there was no guarantee hed ever become a full mage.

Okay, were here, the apprentice said all of a sudden. Magic flowed through his clothes, straightening them to perfection.

I dont hear anything.

Precisely. When the ride calms down, it means were near. No one wants to be seen bringing a shaky box to the Academy.

Dallion looked at his own clothes, then went into the realm of each to fix them as much as possible. The result wasnt bad, although it couldnt compare to what had been achieved through magic. There could be no denying that magic made things appear flashier, even when they werent.

The landing was so soft that Dallion didnt even feel it. It was the apprentice who opened the door and went outside. Grabbing his gear, Dallion followed.

Welcome to the Academy, Nil said.

Up till now, Dallion had caught a few glimpses of the Academy from the perspective of the rogue mage hed faced. Seeing it in person was a hundred times more breathtaking. If there was such a thing as a cyber university campus in which every building was built in baroque fashion, this was it. Millions of glowing decorations of magic covered otherwise flawlessly constructed buildings. Dallion even looked up, expecting to find flying cards and spaceships; though the only thing he saw were a handful of mages flying about.

A large palace-like structure composed of multiple towers stood a few hundred feet away, surrounded by a moat of sapphire water. Figures made entirely of water move about, performing a theatrical play throughout the moat. The performance was at least as good as what Dallion had seen in Nerosal. By the looks of it, though, he was the only one impressed by it. Everyone else walked about, focusing on their own problems. Even Dallions arrival barely earned a few glances.

Different to what youre used to, isnt it? Nil asked in a smug voice.

Come along. We need to get you officially registered. The apprentice went towards the main entrance of the palace.

Thats the Academy?

Thats the Study Hall. Youll spend a few years there before you can go about the Academy proper.

Just how big is the Academy, anyway?

Its much bigger on the inside. The apprentice chuckled. See that there? He pointed in the distance. Thats where the White Eye faction lives. Theyre the ones to keep an eye on while youre here.

Oh?

They watch over everything happening here.

In other words, the mage guard, Dallion thought.

Their faction isnt anything much, but until you become a mid-level apprentice, pretend it is, the man whispered.

Got you. Dallion nodded. Anything else I should know?

Lots, but youll find out.

The inside of the Study Hall was almost a city in itself. From what Nil had said, there were several dozen thousand mages within the world, most of them at the Academy. Corridors the size of streets went on and on, surrounded by walls of buildings on either side.

Dallion followed the apprentice several hundred feet to the only blue building in sight. Three large runes shined in purple just above the entrance.

Administration, the apprentice said. Your new home away from home. Remember it. Youll be going there a lot.

Chapter 654: Imposed Restrictions

The blue building was full of people. Unfortunately, most of them were half his age, looking at him in a mixture of confusion, fascination, and contempt. They could see the magic trait within Dallion, as well as the weapons he was carrying.

This way, a woman waved to Dallion. She was about his age, but the amount of magic running through her was at least ten times greater.

Is that a mage? Dallion asked.

Apprentice, Nil replied. Its a bit too early to get impressed.

There were a total of eight counters on the first floor, three of which were closed. Dallion made his way to the left sight of the staircase. A few steps away, a young boy was handing scroll after scroll to the apprentice at the neighboring stall.

Thats a lot of paperwork, Dallion whispered, glancing in the boys direction.

Oh, those are just the exams of his cohort. Now then, lets get you sorted. She took a blank piece of paper and handed it to Dallion.

Dallion turned the sheet around. There was nothing on the back side, either.

What am I supposed to do with that?

Place it on the counter, then press your right palm against it.

It sounded like something a magic clerk would ask, so Dallion obeyed. The moment he did, purple sparks emerged from his fingers, forming letters. The process of writing was unusual; the letters weren't created in chronological order, but rather appeared at random, slowly forming whole words and sentences. After a few moments, Dallion saw his name as well as a full description of his skills, traits, and their values. Furthermore, all familiars and linked items were also included. Interestingly enough, Nil was absent from the list, while the rest of his personal echoes remained written out.

Hand off, please, the apprentice said, pulling the sheet from under his hand. If Dallion's reaction trait had been any slower, things might have been a little awkward. Let's see what we got. She looked closer. All four rare skills? The woman sounded impressed. And a level seventy-seven?

Silence filled the room. Everyone stopped doing whatever they were doing and looked in Dallion's direction. Needless to say, his circumstances were rather unusual.

You don't get many like me, I take it? he asked, adding boredom to his voice. There was a high chance he could be caught out, but right now, that was preferable to being the center of attention in a room full of wizards.

Excuse me for a moment. I need to check something. The apprentice walked away behind the counter.

Sure, Dallion said beneath his breath.

Slowly, interest waned. Apparently, bureaucracy was able to inflict boredom faster than anything Dallion could do. The chimes coming from outside also had something to do with it. The moment they sounded, all the children rushed into the corridor, leaving Dallion, and the rest of the administration apprentices, behind.

That's a relief,

he thought.

A few minutes later, the apprentice returned with a middle-aged man in a blue robe. That had to be a mage.

So, you're Dallion Darude? the mage asked, looking at him from head to toe. Let's go somewhere where we can talk. Before Dallion could react, the mage disappeared, reappearing a step behind him. Come along. He made his way up the stairs. We don't have all day.

Just like college, Dallion thought, rushing to catch up.

The two went up to a small study on the fourth floor. In some ways, it was similar to Elerias back in the mage village, just a lot smaller.

So, you're a level seventy-seven. The mage sat at his desk.

I take it that's bad.

Well, I wouldn't say bad. It does complicate things. The Academy is structured in a particular way. In the vast majority of cases, people acquire magic upon awakening or upon becoming a noble. Exceptions are nearly non-existent, which is why arrangements were made to remedy the situation.

It sounded like Dallion was already at a bad start.

We were made aware of your age, but the colleague who sent you here neglected to mention the rest of your achievements.

Is it the weapons?

You can keep your clothes and gear in your room. However, you won't be allowed to use them or carry them in public until you become an apprentice. That will be part of your seal. We were also aware of your familiars. Those two will have to be temporarily restricted.

On Dallion's shoulder, Ruby flicked his wings.

Oh, you are allowed to have a pet with you, even if it is a shardfly. Personally, I would advise you to keep him in your room as well. You know what children are like. Some of them might try to hurt it just for thrills. It's forbidden, but you know how it goes.

I'll make sure to spend as little time as possible with them.

Sadly, for all involved, you'll have to. As an irregular, you'll have to start with the new novices. Nothing we can do about that.

You expect me to take a class with a group of children? Dallion wasn't sure whether he should laugh or weep. The whole notion was absurd.

As I said, we're prepared for that. In addition to the other limitations, your seal will give you the appearance of a ten-year-old while in Study Hall premises. You'll be responsible for keeping your traits in check. That is something we cannot restrict so easily.

Great, Dallion thought.

This is where the problems begin. Since you've passed the fourth gate, you have certain abilities that might affect magic.

The mage was no doubt talking about Dallion's spark.

If you were a noble, several tutors would be sent to you and you'd learn the principles of magic safely in the comfort of your domain. However

You'd appreciate it if I don't destroy anything during class, Dallion said with a smirk.

The look that the joke earned Dallion indicated that humor wasn't a mage's strong suit. He was going to have to work on that in the future.

Then there's your hunter status. Hunters are allowed to leave the Academy at any point in order to fulfill their requests. When that rule was created, no one in their right mind thought that there could be a novice hunter.

Nil, what exactly is the problem? As long as I transform back into myself outside of the Study Hall, will it be such a big deal that I have travel privileges?

Novices are forbidden from leaving the Study Hall and its surroundings, the echo said. A hunter is freely allowed to do so. You can see the conflict.

That was quite unfortunate. Dallions first thoughts were to leave at the first opportunity just to see whether it wouldnt short-circuit some spell. At least that would put a lit on the mages arrogance.

I can vow not to leave until I become an apprentice, if you prefer? he offered.

That will only complicate things further. My request would be for you to refrain from leaving and also remove your seal as quickly as possible.

Ill do my best sir. If he were to become a novice, it was wise for him to start acting the part. Anything else?

I trust you were taught the basic rules here?

Actually, sir, I wasnt told everything would have been explained to me once I got here.

Of course you were. The mage frowned. People not doing their job, as usual.

I am sorry, sir.

The mage drew a pattern in the air. As he did, Dallion saw magic pass through his arm and fingers, creating symbols in the air. Once done. The light of the symbols imploded, transforming into a scroll.

Everythings there. Learn it as quickly as possible.

Thank you, sir?

That was anticlimactic. Dallion expected there to be at least a brief explanation. Apparently, mages were the same everywhere: unwilling to waste their time with things they deemed beneath them.

Now give me your left hand.

Without a word of warning, the man began drawing with magic on it. Dallions every hunter instinct yelled for him to pull his hand back. At the same time, he knew that this was part of the registration process. The fine pattern that was being created represented a seal that would restrict his magic, and other things, as the mage had explained, for a certain period of time.

Once done, the mage almost literally threw Dallion out of his study, telling him to go to his dorm. Naturally, no directions were given. Thanks to Nil, though, Dallion didnt need them. The seal, as it turned out, also contained the number of his room. The novice wing was on the second floor a few miles along the north corridor. Reaching it wasnt as difficult as finding it, since for some reason the mages had designated numbers to rooms at random. The only firm principle was that the first number always indicated the floor.

Was it the same when you were a novice? Dallion asked in his search for room two-thirteen.

The Study Hall hasnt changed in centuries, dear boy. The last time, it took an Emperors visit and even then; the changes were mostly cosmetic. You can say that mages are the only profession that has shrunk in time rather than the opposite.

What about empaths?

An empath isn't a profession. Also, we live in the age of human dominance, each generation has fewer mages than the one before it. If you include the wars in the last five centuries, things aren't looking too good in the long term.

After half an hour of walking aimlessly around and getting conflicting directions from the people around, Dallion finally made it to his room. To his surprise, it was almost a lot more comfortable than expected, not to mention roomier. By rough estimates, the space was about a thousand square feet, complete with furniture, an actual bathroom, and a large window with a view of a non-existing landscape. Knowing it was an illusion didn't make Dallion appreciate it any less.

What do you think, Ruby? He placed his harpsword on the nearest table.

Fake, the shardfly replied.

Yes, but sometimes fake can be beautiful.

Ruby didn't respond.

Several sets of clothes were waiting for Dallion in the room's wardrobe. They were all, thankfully, his size. Nil has explained that the restriction seal was also going to affect them as well, though only in the Study Hall.

Taking his clothes off, Dallion took a bath—the first real one he'd had in a week. As with everything else, here it was enjoyable, but different. For one thing, the water was in the form of jelly-like cubes that had to be scrubbed on before regaining its liquid state.

Finished washing, Dallion put on the pajamas prepared for him, and went straight to bed. If school as any indication, getting up early would be a thing. Also, he wanted to read the scroll the mage had given him before going to sleep.

According to the explanations, there were three levels of novices. Initially, Dallion would learn methods of identifying, manipulating, and using natural magic. Thinking back, that had to be what the Canopa guardian and Cleric had been doing.

Second rank novices delved into actual spell crafting by using their magic to create symbols of power. Finally, third rank novices learned symbol combinations and spell composition. From what Dallion could gather, that had to be enough to undo the seal placed on them.

There were a few brief mentions of the apprentice ranks which were five in total but nothing worth remembering at this point. Everything else in the scroll involved proper etiquette, ways of addressing all the various ranks of mages and apprentices, as well as a map of the novice wing.

Enough for today. Dallion rolled up the scroll, then turned to the side. The moment he did, day turned to night within the room.

I hope you won't return to your old habits of skim-reading, Nil grumbled.

I hope so as well, Dallion replied with a smile. Nil, what do you think is happening outside?

Outside the capital? Conflicts are slow. It'll take months, possibly years, before the war reaches its peak. For the moment, it's just border conflicts. The situation in Wétie is a bit trickier. I wouldn't be surprised if lines are drawn in a month or two.

You're still in Nerosal, aren't you?

Unlike the rest of my guild, there's nowhere else I can go. Don't worry. I'll be fine, and so will the Gremlins Timepiece. Just focus on learning spellcrafting. You have a rare moment of calm. There's no telling how long it will last.

Chapter 655: A day as Himself

I'm going the best I could, Fatun grumbled. It's bad enough we took this shortcut. The death rate along here is thirty percent.

I'll be fine. Dallion tapped the hilt of his harpsisword.

I'm counting on that. What's the good in earning a huge profit if I'm not there to enjoy it?

I hear you.

So far, they had been extremely lucky. There hadn't been a single Star spawn creature the entire trip. If things continued like this, they would be at their destination in half a day, safe and sound. And then Dallion would finally see Euryale again.

Keep on driving. I'll check the cargo.

Right. I'll yell if something pops up.

Carefully, Dallion moved to the back of the wagon. Wooden crates were everywhere, each with a mark of a waxing blue moon. Dallion opened one. Rows of orange crossbow bolts lined the crates. They looked normal to the naked eye, yet Dallion knew that they weren't just bolts—they were rockets. Six of them were enough to destroy a fortress. With this amount, one could easily wipe out a noble from existence. The question was which noble was going to bite the dust.

Everything okay back there? Fatun asked.

Looks like. Dallion placed his hand on the top of a crate. All fine on your end?

Not sure. Clouds are gathering. It's too far to tell if they're aiming for us.

Keep on going. If we run, they'll just chase us. Maybe they'll take us for ordinary merchants.

Ordinary merchants, the driver repeated. I used to be that once, before you got me involved in this. Too late to back out now. He laughed.

Dallion glanced towards the front. Only a crack of the sky was visible, but enough for him to see the threat Fatun spoke about. Dozens of clouds were forming, all converging on a single point. An army of furies was gathering.

I should never have built the rockets, Dallion whispered.

Light flooded the room, shining through Dallion's eyelids. Out of habit, he split into instances, all of them jumping out of bed. Several went for the harpsisword, others looked around to assess the situation.

Less than a second was necessary for Dallion to see that he was in no danger. A few more for him to remember where he was.

Better get ready, dear boy, Nil said. Arriving late on the first day is poor form.

Dallions instances faded away, leaving only one.

How much times left?

Half an hour the standard to get up and ready.

That was way more than Dallion needed. The first thing he did was go through his exercise routine. Thanks to his body and reaction traits, that took him a neat five minutes, rest included. Done, he washed up, made use of the magical toilet, then got dressed.

Will you guys be fine on your own? Dallion asked his weapons as he tucked the Nox dagger in his right boot.

Dont worry, the armadil shield said. This is supposed to be the safest place there is. No one would dare attack the Mage Academy.

Ruby, you want to come along or stay here?

The shardfly remained on the ceiling motionless.

Remember, no drawing in the room. Im not sure I can fix anything here.

A single flick of the deep red wings, indicated that the order was received and not appreciated.

Combing his hair back with his fingers, Dallion left the room. Upon crossing the threshold, everything around him suddenly became bigger. Faster than the human eye, Dallion reached for his dagger. A few children rushed by him, barely giving him a glance. The odd thing was that they now were the same height as him.

Great. Dallion relaxed a bit, then looked closely at himself. There was no mistake he had transformed into a ten-year-old version of himself.

Cant wait for the first day, he grumbled beneath his breath as he closed and locked the door behind him.

The auditorium he was supposed to get to was a fair distance away, according to the scroll map. Just to be on the same side, Dallion followed anyone his perceived age. Even without Nils advice, that was a method that had worked quite well back on Earth.

Where you? a child of about eleven asked at the door. In standard terms, he couldnt pass as particularly large, but from Dallions new point of view, he was massive.

Im new. Dallion said with the cockiness he had acquired when dealing with nobles.

The other just stared, waves of confusion emanating from him. Dallion took advantage of that and went inside.

Over fifty children filled the room. Based on the conversations going on, none of them had any experience with magic either. That would have made Dallion feel a bit better, if they hadnt taken all the back rows of the auditorium. The only remaining seats were in the front row, right across the podium.

Figures, Dallion thought, and made his way there. As he did, the topic of the whispers shifted towards him. Apparently, the rumor of his true age had already spread.

Wheres your scroll? a girl behind Dallion whispered in a fashion that made it a lot more obvious than if she had asked in her normal voice.

I didnt know I needed one, Dallion replied calmly.

The girl and several other children around her looked at Dallion with dread, as if hed committed the greatest crime in the world.

You have to have a scroll! The mage will be mad if you dont.

Do you have an extra scroll? Dallion turned around.

Frightened faces looked at one another. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell that at least two of them did, but were afraid to offer it to him, lest they also be implicated in the crime.

Itll be fine. Ill ask the mage to give me one when we start.

Do I really have to go through this? Dallion grumbled mentally.

Rules are rules, dear boy. Besides, being in an actual academic environment might do you some good.

Watching kids rub boogers on their sleeves? Doubt it.

Class started a few minutes later with the sudden appearance of the instructor on the podium. The moment he did, Dallion immediately noticed three things: the person was roughly his age, an apprentice based on the magic within him, and a fury.

Let's have some silence, the fury announced. All sound immediately ceased.

Most of the children were amazed, but Dallion could see just how the apprentice had manipulated the air in the room, resulting in the silence. He also saw the faint threads of magic that had gone into that.

So, thats natural magic, he thought.

Im Palag and will be your rank one instructor, the fury went on. Youll be learning the most basic fundamentals there are. It might seem easy, but if you dont learn this step properly, youll never be able to spellcraft at all.

Thats a bit over simplistic, Nil said. And overdramatic. The whole thing is intuitive and once you get used to it theres no messing up.

The fact that youve awakened with the magic trait already means youre able to see it in the world around you. Its very important to keep in mind that not everyone is like that. In fact, the great majority of people are unable to see magic at all.

This was the point at which gasps, and whispers would emerge. Since the fury was still controlling the air within the auditorium, none were heard.

And it doesn't stop there. We, as mages, also have the ability to sense magic in other ways, and most importantly, to touch it. That is why

Dallion raised his arm. No one had said that this was the way to ask a question or that questions could be asked at all while a mage was speaking but he had the sense that things couldn't be that different from Earth.

Err The instructor paused. It was as if he'd seen Dallion for the first time. Is something the matter?

Sense in what way? Dallion asked. Unlike the rest of the class, his voice was allowed to be heard. Is it like sound? Smell? Taste?

Interesting question. The fury's eyes narrowed. It's neither of those things. And I strongly advise you not to try. It's more like a sensation when you get near. It's one of those things you need to feel to get used to. As a matter of fact

Threads of magic went up his right arm, through his fingers and into the air. From there they spread, moving like a serpent along the rows of the auditorium.

This is what a basic thread of magic feels like. The fury said. Try touching it.

Half the children slowly moved their fingers close to the thread. A few tried to lick it instead with devastating results. Magic, for all intents and purposes, felt like electricity mixed with jelly. It wasn't strong enough to cause any serious pain, just a tingly sensation. It also made Dallion's hair stand on edge.

In past ages, magic was called aether. The word remains in use today. It has been claimed that referring to it in such fashion is important to distinguish it from the trait. Whether that's true, you'll learn when you become apprentices. The only reason I'm telling you is in case you find it while reading literature.

Dallion grabbed the thread tightly and pulled it towards him. It presented no resistance. However, when he let it go, it instantly sprung back to its previous position, like a rubber band.

The truth is that both the magic that you see and your trait are the same. Your magic trait determines the magic within you. The more you increase your trait level, the more magic you'll have. Is everything clear so far?

The children looked at each other. Judging by the confusion emanating from everyone, Dallion knew that it was wishful thinking.

Well get to that later, the fury sighed. Everyone, let go of the thread.

Before they could comply, he cut off the source at the tip of his finger, causing everything in the room to fizzle out.

As mages, you have the ability to use magic to manipulate the elements, cast spells, and a few other things. All of that requires magic. Now, that magic can come from within you, as you've seen, or from the surrounding world.

A boy with raven black hair in the second row raised his arm.

Yes? the fury pointed at him.

Does that mean that we can cast spells even if we're a very low level?

Dallion looked over his shoulder at the direction of the boy. That was a rather good question, and definitely not one he thought a child would come up with.

I thought you said I was the only exception, Nil?

If you'd paid attention, you'd have seen that echoes were the only thing not specified on your registration sheet. The children of nobles had plenty of instructor echoes to give them advice. I would say that someone wants to make sure you're not hogging all the instructors attention.

For a while, yes. However, you need to be very lucky to find a large magic source in the spot you're fighting. And even if you do, there isn't anything you can do that someone with a higher level trait could. The only difference would be that they'll be better at it.

The fury drew a pattern in the air. Once finished, the pattern transformed into a pouch. As he opened it, small purple glowing cubes flew through the air, stopping on the desk in front of each child.

These are magic cubes, the apprentice said. Sometimes referred to by their arcane name aether cubes. What we'll be doing today is drawing magic from the cube into the air, then putting it back in again.

Finally, something useful, Dallion thought. It wasn't much more like the first letters of the alphabet but it was something. Also, something told him that it might be a bit more difficult than the fury was letting on.

Chapter 656: Splitting Brawl

Drawing out mana turned out easier than expected. The initial problem was extracting the magic from the object itself. Everyone had seen how easy it was to touch a thread. However, the walls of the cube prevented the children from reaching it. Trying to crush it only resulted in an instant release and dispersal of magic, often with an amusing visual display. That wasn't the goal of the task, though, and all they got was a replacement and a few words of encouragement.

After about a minute of meddling, Dallion did the next logical thing: focus some of his own magic into his fingers and use it to reach into the cube.

The result was immediate. A thin thread of energy emerged from the side of the cube. Overenthusiastic by the result, Dallion pulled the thread only to have it snap. After some comical mistakes, Dallion discovered that it was all a matter of consistency. As long as the thread was pulled at a constant speed, it withheld the pressure. Attempting to increase the speed gradually was only efficient up to a certain point, after which it would snap and coil back into the cube. The trick was to pull it fast and steady enough to get the whole thing out.

Wow, he got it out! someone whispered after Dallion managed to deprive the cube of its magic. Left alone, the object had transformed into a common piece of white crystal, very much like the material found in the Glass Mounts.

How'd you do it? the girl behind Dallion asked.

Dallion began to answer, but the moment he did, the fury negated the air vibrations, bringing silence to the room, yet again.

No assisting, he said in a harsh tone. All of you need to do it by yourselves. Since the Purple Moon granted you his trait, he believes that you're smart enough to use it.

The explanation was nonsense, of course, but given that the target audience were children, it did the trick. Everyone focused on their cubes with increased vigor. Dallion, on the other hand, focused on the second part of the task, which, unlike the first, was a lot more fiddly.

Once entirely pulled out, the thread had turned into a ball of magic. It was squishy enough to hold, and quite stretchable, yet pushing it into its container was the same as pushing toothpaste back into its tube. Dallion tried squishing it in through the side, through the edge, even through the tips, but it always resisted.

What was supposed to be a quick task ended up lasting several hours. By noon, half the class had managed to pull the magic out, but none were able to return it.

Chimes sounded throughout the auditorium.

That's it for today, Palag said, ending the imposed silence. Since none of you managed to complete this fundamental step of magic, tomorrow we'll continue.

What do we do with the magic we have? a boy asked.

Leave it. It'll vanish by the end of the day. Now, go have lunch. For those who failed pulling out the magic, I suggest you visit the novice library. That is all.

Noise erupted as everyone rushed to get out of the room as quickly as possible. Dallion, of course, remained. He wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere.

Dallion. The instructor approached him. You stay.

Yes, sir. Dallion did his best not to sound annoyed. Being bossed around by someone his age wasn't particularly new. Having to deal with giants twice his height, still needed getting used to.

The two patiently waited for the last of the other children to leave, after which Palag used his magic currents to close the door.

You're the hunter, right?

Yes, I am sir.

A smile appeared on the fury's face.

You can drop that when there's no one around. I'm just an apprentice.

There was a time when Dallion could have thought this was the fury being nice. Life had jaded him to the point he could almost see the request on the fury's lips.

It takes months for a person to move to rank two. That thing about the week is part of the training experience. Unlike you, the rest of the kids need to learn how to be an awakened while also grasping the principles of magic.

Are you saying I can advance faster?

No. Even if you were a noble, it would take you about that long. The difference is that they don't spend all that time learning. You don't have to, either.

Here it comes. You're asking for a favor, aren't you?

Not exactly. I want to hire you.

That wasn't a response Dallion expected. The Academy frequently hired hunters for various tasks, though having it happen on the first day of school was a bit too much.

Is that allowed? The mage in administration said that

Technically, you'll be supervised, which is good enough as far as the Academy is concerned. You'll get used to that once you become an apprentice. Mages are great at finding loopholes everywhere.

I've been told. Dallion sighed. Why me, though? There are a lot less controversial hunters out there.

Apprentices aren't allowed to hire hunters. The only way is for me to ask the mage I'm associated with, or send in a formal request to administration. However, I'm allowed to oversee novice development both here and in the field. And we will eventually go into the field.

Now it made a lot more sense. Not only was this a rare chance for the fury to get something from his wish list, but to do so for free. At no point was price discussed, probably because it wasn't of consequence. Being a mage was pretty much the same as being a high-leveled awakened: money was a non-issue.

You're free to say no, of course. Your progress won't suffer too much, but you'll have a lot more boredom to look forward to. Also, while outside the Academy, the seal can be activated entirely to my discretion. Short of using magic in your grown-up form, you'll be able to do pretty much anything else.

Dallion crossed his arms.

You don't have to decide immediately. The task won't be too difficult, just

When? Dallion interrupted.

Huh? The fury's expression shifted. That was to be expected. While he was Dallion's current magic instructor, he was also a sheltered awakened. It was doubtful he'd spent any serious length of time in the wilderness on his own and always had spells to shield him should anything go wrong. You don't want to know what you'd be doing?

Catch an animal, find an artifact, or protect you while doing something, Dallion replied. There aren't that many options.

Oh, right. The fury paused for a few moments. Four days. We go in four days. Till then, keep on practicing.

Sure. Four days couldn't come fast enough.

One hint. Magic is all about pulling. Never pushing.

As the day progressed, Dallion got to know more of the spoken and unspoken rules that existed. Part of the rules were related to the trait. Possessing it allowed him access to one of the largest libraries he had ever seen. The novice library was almost the size of a realm itself, filled with so many scrolls and books that giant crossroad signs indicated the categories. Naturally, there was a catch: the contents of the books, as well as the signs themselves, were only visible after a certain

level of magic. At present, all that Dallion could see were a few shelves among a vast sea of blankness.

Everything was described as it would be to a child. It seemed that while magic was universal, its nature depended on its frequency of vibration or speed as it was written to be. Slow magic was most stable, while fast more volatile, causing it to disperse faster in the air. Power was the second characteristic based on which magic was classified, although the importance of that wasn't specified. Given the basic principles of awakening, Dallion could assume that the stronger magic one used, the more potent the spells would be. Alas, even going through all the books, visible to him, there was no mention of how magic could be used to make actual spells. Clearly, the Academy didn't believe in skipping steps. One thing the books and scrolls were filled with was effective ways of pulling magic out without snapping.

Nil, Dallion thought, closing the book he was reading. All these are just examples.

Before you can run, you need to learn how to walk, dear boy, the echo said.

That's not what I meant. These are just lists of magic speed within and the elements they could be found in.

Quite right. Children need to memorize as many of those as possible to get to the next stage.

Why isn't there a formula?

Using his scholarly skills, Dallion concentrated on the problem. Initially, the task seemed impossible. There were countless cases of magic of various speed within one material. Even with the vast sample size, there was nothing linking them together. Yet, after a few hours of pondering, a principle began to emerge. It was a very specific pattern, only valid for certain elements, but it was enough. As it turned out, similar to sound, materials only allowed magic of a certain frequency. The common mistake that people made something that only a person would notice was the vast majority of examples given contained mixed elements. Pure metals, such as iron, tin, gold, and silver, had a unique frequency that was based on their atomic number. In the case of two-metal alloys, ranges emerged that depended on the ratio of metals.

Dallion spent a few more hours modifying his formula to include other elements, but his recollection of chemistry wasn't as good as he had hoped. Gassil probably had a huge advantage in that area. Still, as the fight had shown, general knowledge wasn't what gave spellcasters the edge.

At eight, Dallion was politely kicked out of the novice library and told to get some food. In the wilderness, skipping a day or two never was an issue. Academy rules, though, required three visits to the novice dining room per day.

The good news was that it was mostly empty. The bad that it was mostly empty.

Hey, the large who had tried to intimidate Dallion earlier that morning said. You're the one who thinks he's a big shot.

A handful of others were also there. Most were at the large boys table. A few more were eating on their own.

Hey, cant you hear me? The boy got up. His entire posse quickly followed.

Dallion had been through school once to know exactly what that meant. This was probably the local band of bullies. Just thinking that hed have to deal with such petty things made him simultaneously laugh and cry internally.

On paper, the Academy had rules prohibiting fighting. However, taking a close look at the boys in question, one could tell that rules probably didnt apply to them. Judging by how well their hair was kept, and the subtle but expensive jewelry they were wearing, there could be no mistake that they came from noble families.

I hear you, Dallion said. In his current state, his voice sounded squeaky rather than terrifying.

Whats your name?

Dal. Whats yours?

The question made the boy hesitate again. Like most bullies, especially from a noble family, he wasnt used to being talked back to by anyone other than another noble. That, and his vast size, gave him a large advantage in the group of novices.

DErango, he said with a slight smirk. Phoil dErango.

Counts family, Elenot province, Nil said.

Related to the count? Dallion asked casually, taking a bite of his feed as he did.

Hes my father, Phoil said with pride.

Good for you. It doesnt matter until you become a mage, though. Novices are equal.

Some are more equal than others.

Oh? It was Dallions turn to smirk. Are those your words or did an echo tell you that?

Careful, dear boy. Getting into a fight with your traits might not be seen as the best

Phoil split into three instances.

Chapter 657: A Simple Task

Combat splitting? Dallion thought as he was being attacked.

It wasnt exactly an attack. The large boy was just trying to slap him in the face. The attack was well executed. All three instances approached from different directions in an attempt to catch him off guard. There was a time when such an attack would have been troublesome. Not now, though.

Dallion moved to avoid all attacks without even resorting to splitting. He didnt even stand up, continuing to eat, while his opponent desperately tried to hit him. If a grownup would see, theyd call this outright bullying. As far as Dallion knew his traits were five times higher than those of the child, maybe more. Of course, that didnt stop Phoil from persisting.

Get him! the boy shouted, splitting into five instances.

Someones been training, Dallion thought.

The rest of Phoils posse joined in, each of them splitting into anywhere between two and four instances. A multitude of instances filled the section of the dining room. All but a few of the other children looked in the direction, observing the fight. Normally, such behavior would be looked down on, but since no magic was involved, there didnt seem to be any mages running in to break it up.

Remember, no force splitting, Nil reminded. In fact, it might be better if you dont split at all.

Dallion sighed. He didnt have to. The only thing the boys childish attempts had achieved was preventing him from finishing his dinner. Against half a dozen opponents, Dallion had no choice but to move around. Even so, he continued to only evade attacks, in the hopes that the children would notice the difference in levels and stop. Unfortunately, they only took that as a sign of weakness on his part. Overconfidence was emanating from all of them to the point that there was nothing else.

Two jumped on the table, attempting him to reach him with sweeping kicks. Their instances collided, causing both of them to fade away.

They arent even coordinating. Dallion stepped to the side, avoiding a series of punches from Phoil. Dozens of guard sequences were available to him, should he choose to use his skills. Part of him wanted to do so, just to teach the arrogant brats a lesson. A little pain could be just what they needed to get rid of their bad habits. Then again, fear could be just as motivating a factor.

Striking multiple times faster, Dallion removed a few of their valuable trinkets without them even noticing. He was about to do more when the instances suddenly faded away. It was a force splitting, but not one that Dallion had initiated.

Youre interrupting my dinner, a black-haired boy said; the same that had raised his hand after Dallion in class.

Everyone instantly stopped, looking at him with fear. The expression was enough to tell Dallion that was the child of an archduke. Only someone of such lineage would impose such an amount of fear and respect.

Related to an archduke and a mage. Hell definitely go far, Dallion thought.

Sorry, Phoil said. He just

Hes a hunter, which means he can beat you up any way he wants.

The larger boys posse looked at one another. Phoil himself hesitated a few seconds before turning around and quickly leaving the room.

Thanks, Dallion said, glancing at what was left of his dinner. Part was kicked off the table during the fight. Funnily enough, an apple remained.

You dont owe me one, the black-haired said. But still, my mother would still like to hire your services at some point.

Another request? Dallion hadn't received that many in the year he'd spent as a hunter. For the most part, he'd take small jobs that most others would ignore. Now, in less than a day, he'd received requests from a mage and someone from an archduke's family.

With pleasure. Dallion nodded.

The offer was clear: accept the request and the boy would reduce the amount of trouble he'd get into as a novice. If it wasn't for his music skills, Dallion would almost think that the whole incident was staged so that the noble's mother could get what she wanted. Given the emanations of rivalry and faint interest coming from the black-haired boy, that was most likely not the case.

Picking up the apple, Dallion returned to his room, where he kept on trying to fill up the magic cube again. The instructor hadn't given him any additional cubes, so Dallion took advantage of what he had learned in the library to pull out magic from parts of his room and try to shove them back into the cube.

After a while, he thought back to what Palag had told him: magic could only be pulled, not pushed. The basic idea was clear. It was the execution that presented the problem. In order to pull the thread from the other side, Dallion had to find a way to make a hole in the cube of crystal. Yet, doing so without any devices seemed impossible. For a moment, he considered breaking it in two parts, then pressing them against the thread, similar to creating a sandwich with the magic inside. After one attempt, it turned out that wasn't the solution.

The following morning, everything started anew. After a calm breakfast, everyone went to the auditorium, where they were given a new magic cube and told to practice in silence. Several more children managed to extract the magic; their friends had shared their discovery out of class, making the solution easier to find. However, no one was to put it back in again.

Dallion was hoping to have a conversation with the fury after class, but no sooner had the chimes begun, than the instructor vanished. His speed was well beneath the threshold Dallion needed to catch up. From the point of view of the children, though, it was the same as if he had resorted to magic.

Following lunch, Dallion went briefly through the library in the hopes of finding something he had missed the previous day.

It's not like you to take so much time on this, dear boy, Nil commented. Maybe you're losing your touch?

Very funny, Nil. Dallion finished the book he was skimming, then put it back in place.

As much as he hated to admit it, the echo was right. He was given a task that ten-year-olds could figure out in a week, and he had still to reach any breakthrough. He had tried stretching the thread and pressing it on top of the cube in the hopes it would go through, but that hadn't worked either.

Damn it, he cursed. If only there was a way to

A flash of inspiration rushed through his mind, instantly followed by anger that he hadn't thought about it. In the past, Dallion had complained he wasn't relying on his experience from Earth, now those same experiences were the things holding him back.

The moment he had learned how to pull out magic from the cube, he had instinctively visualized it as taking something out of a box or toothpaste from a tube. The truth was that this isn't a box; it was solid on all sides. Pulling a magic thread from one side was just the same as pulling it from another.

Holding his breath, Dallion held the ball of magic against a side of the cube. It remained there, unwilling to budge any further. At that point, Dallion sent magic to the fingers of his other hand and had it reach through the cube and pull from the other side. The ball of magic budged. It took a few attempts to get it right, but finally a thread made its way into the cube. The moment Dallion let go, all remaining magic flew in, as if a spring had been released. The cube shone brightly once more.

That was it? Dallion asked in disbelief.

Just the first step, dear boy. The execution was sloppy, to say the least. Besides, this is a very small and conveniently shaped item. In real life, things would be a lot more difficult. You better keep on practicing.

The following day, Dallion was quick to boast about his achievement the first chance he got. He was aware that it was a petty attempt to impress ten-year-olds, and yet it felt so good.

Not bad, the fury said. Everyone, I want you to pay attention. Do it again.

Dallion stood up, turned to the rest of the class, then repeated the process. What was more, he partially split into six instances, having his hands pull the magic out then put it back in again from each of the other five sides of the cube.

Half of the children gasped, some frowned, and one of the black-haired nobles copied him, though without the combat splitting.

Sir, what's the point of putting magic back into items? Phoel asked. Why not use it on the spot?

Because there might not be magic where you are, the instructor explained. Extracting magic and storing it into a container ensures you get to use it at a later point. More importantly, though, the same method is used for adding magic to yourself.

Reaching behind the podium, the fury took out a sturdy wooden box. Opening it, revealed a series of small golden disks. Even from this distance, Dallion could instantly tell two things: the objects were abundant in magic, and they were also artifacts from a past age.

This, the instructor took one of the disks, is a magic enhancer. They were used in the past to increase the magic of a person, similar to awakening items. Needless to say, they are rather valuable. They have one drawback: they cannot increase the magic trait of a person above five. He took a few steps forward, placing the item in front of Dallion. As novices, you'll be given one once you manage to achieve what Dal has. Anything else needs to be earned through excellence.

Now that the item was closer, it became obvious that the item was in fact made of crystal. The cold was nothing more than an outside ring, wrapped around the glowing purple core.

Carefully, Dallion picked it up. It was cold and pleasantly heavy. Its flat surface made extracting the magic a lot easier than the cube. However, there was no indication of how to ingest the magic once it was out.

Dont worry, the instructor continued. The artifact has a safeguard. You wont be able to exhaust the item without consuming its magic. And please dont try to eat it. It wont work.

I suppose I must figure this out on my own as well? Dallion looked at the other side of the disk.

That goes without saying, dear boy. The only thing I can guarantee is that the results will be a lot more satisfying.

Dallion chuckled, then proceeded to grab and pull out the magic thread from the item. The experience was no different from extracting it from the magic cube. Still holding the end with two fingers, Dallion bent them inwards, so the thread touched his palm, then used his other hand to try and pull it through. Apparently, living tissue reacted differently than inorganic matter.

Youre overthinking things again, Nil said. Just do what comes naturally.

Yeah, right, Dallion grumbled. As a seventy-seven level awakened, he didnt want to start from scratch, even if he had to. If he were to progress smoothly, though, he had to let go of all of his pre-conceptions and start from a blank slate. It was logical to assume that everything needed to consume magic had already been taught. It couldnt be finding it, since that presented no challenge right now. Pulling out magic was obviously involved, just as was pulling it in.

Dallion let go of the thread. Instantly, it went back into the artifact.

I need to focus my own magic to touch it, he said to himself. And magic to pull it out.

His own magic went up to his fingers, then into the item as he grabbed it. So far, so good. If he were an object, hed need to find a way to pull it through himself. However, since his own magic prevented it from physically doing so

No, Dallion whispered. Could it be so simple? It seemed absurd, but since this was a childs task, he decided to give it a go.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

Chapter 658: Vixenair

The AETHERIZER is level 0 of 3

You are at the START of the AETHERIZERs first level.

Unseal all levels to fulfill the AETHERIZERs destiny.

Two purple rectangles glowed in an oval chamber surrounded by Roman columns. The ground was of polished mosaic with lines of magic going in all directions like raw electric currents.

A sphere item, Dallion thought. It almost made him feel nostalgic.

The other good news was that he had returned to being his usual self. While the seal was still on him, glowing like a purple brand, it only remained in effect within certain areas of the Academy, and an items awakening realm was clearly considered not to be the Academy proper.

What have you done? Nil asked, his voice trembling in anger to the point that he was having difficulty talking.

I took the next logical step. Since I couldnt affect the item in the real world, I thought that

Didnt I tell you that magic is different?! You dont just enter magic items!

Dallion didnt see what the big deal was. Just to make sure, he split into instances and looked about using his music vision, then his layer magic vision. There were no creatures to be seen, and certainly no guardians.

Lines of magic continued from the spot beneath him towards the only exit in the chamber. Beyond it, only darkness was visible.

Its a sphere item, Nil, Dallion said as his firebird familiar appeared, surrounding him in blue flames. Its not the first time Ive leveled up one of those. It wont be the first time I fight a magic guardian, either.

Dear boy, there is no doubt that you have grown a lot since you left your home village. However, you still have the annoying habit of

I have the ability to leave the item at any point I want. Besides, with the seal having no effect here, Im back to my normal self and can even use magic if I want. Lastly, if things go sideways, I can use spark attacks.

For over ten seconds, the old echo didnt respond.

I see youve given this some thought.

Who do you take me for? Some country bumpkin? Its been a millennium since I made those mistakes. If I didnt think I could do this, I wouldnt have tried it.

Of course, Dallion chose not to admit that he had taken the wrong approach. Hearing Nils reaction he knew that this was not the correct way to consume magic, at now that he was here, he was curious to see what hed find within the artifacts realm, not to mention what it would transform into once he fulfilled its destiny.

This isnt something you should meddle with, the echo insisted. Not yet, in any event.

Why?

Ive said all Im willing to say.

Nil, all this time, I never noticed how dramatic you really are.

Very funny. Dont expect me to jump it if you get in trouble.

Petty much?

It has nothing to do with pettiness. You are dealing with magic. Aside from not being bestowed with all the information of my original, theres nothing I can tell you until you learn it. And given that you dont even know how to consume mana to increase your level, that means Im not able to provide you with any useful information.

Point taken. Dallion summoned his harpsisword, then split into a dozen instances.

Stepping through the archway revealed the first level of the sphere items realm. Dallion expected it to be a corridor, a cave, or even a maze of sorts. As it turned out, he was both right and wrong. An octagonal tunnel continued forward as far as the eye could see. The only reason it did was because the end was blocked by a giant mirror. Unfortunately, it wasnt the only one. Hundreds of other mirrors were placed on the floor, walls, and reflecting each at different angles, effectively creating a three-dimensional maze in a one-dimensional space. The concept would have been genius if it wasnt for the glimmering shapes that occasionally made an appearance.

Magic creatures, Dallion thought.

Nil, if I asked you whether I can walk into a mirror, what would you tell me?

That its beyond my ability to respond, the echo replied.

Thank you, Nil.

Using one of his instances, Dallion moved to the nearest mirror on the wall and placed his hand on it. The mirror was cold and solid. Forcing his way in would likely only result in it shattering.

Purple markers filled the area like small dots in a coloring book.

SPELLCRAFT skills activated.

Follow the suggested parkers for best efficiency

That was all well and good, except that they made no sense whatsoever. To a certain degree, the markers shared the principle of forging, only instead of folding an object from the outside, Dallion was asked to fold reality itself around him.

Theres no way this is magic, he said, looking at the hundreds of dots. Some were inches away, while others were on the other side of the tunnel; and judging by the numbers, the sequence didnt seem to take distance into effect.

Thats not magic, its spellcraft. Theres a major difference.

So, I have to use spellcraft to level up the item?

You dont have to do anything, dear boy. You can always just give up.

Thinking back, it had taken Dallion months before he learned to use his forging skills. This seemed quite similar. He could have a go and see what happened, but given the vastness of the task, he decided to try something else instead something he had actually learned.

Placing his right hand on the mirror, Dallion concentrated. The magic within him flowed through, sprouting on the other side as a flower. Thento his great shockit continued forward, forming a stick figure version of him. Two realities opened to him: one in the corridor and the one in the mirror. It was like maintaining two instances, only a lot longer and more intense.

Taking a few steps forward, Dallion looked around in his stick figure. A thread of magic continued to connect it through the mirror to his actual body. All actions were a fraction of a second slower, as if he were controlling something by remote control. A few seconds of moving around, though, and he got the hang of it. The only major drawback was that he didnt have the ability to summon weapons with his magic projection.

Okay, so Im in a maze, he told himself. Does that mean I must find an exit?

The projection continued forward. Not after long, it reached another mirror. This time, Dallion didnt have to create a projection of the projection. The magic wire-frame just walked through the second mirror as if it were a normal door. He was just about to look around in the new section of the maze when a purple silhouette of a fox emerged in front of him.

COMBAT INITIATED

A massive mouth appeared throughout the creature, almost tearing the silhouette in two, then bit into the projections waist.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

One of Dallions realities collapsed, bringing him back into the tunnel of mirrors. Instinctively he burst into instances, ready to strike the creature that had attacked him, yet there was no trace of it. The most he could see was a twinkle pass through several mirrors then vanish altogether.

Is this one of those things you cant tell me about? Dallion asked, with three instances watching his back. The creature had come way too fast and attacked without warning. In the past, there was always a pause between the combat notification rectangle and the actual attack. With this creature, things were simultaneous.

Sorry. Youre all on your own.

Several minutes passed and the creature remained nowhere to be seen. By then Lux has already managed to restore Dallions health, bringing him back to a hundred percent.

Taking a deep breath, Dallion focused his magic on the mirror once more. As before, a magic projection emerged, making its way down the mirrored corridor. When it reached the next mirror, Dallion tried to create a new instance, yet that only worked for the physical him; he was going to have to rely on his other traits to get through this one.

Acrobatics, he thought and leapt through the next mirror frame.

There was no sign of the fox. Dallion looked around, both with his projection as well as his physical self. Suddenly, there was a purple blink in one of the mirrors. He couldnt be certain where the creature was going, but just in case, he had his projection do a three-sixty spin along with a high kick.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

The silhouette appeared in front of his projection only to be slammed in the neck, then thrown out of the corridor and the mirror itself.

AETHERIZER LEVEL 1 GUARDIAN

Species: VIXENAIR

Class: MAGIC

Health: 30%

Traits:

- **BODY 20**
- **MIND 20**
- **REACTION 50**
- **PERCEPTION 20**
- **MAGIC 20**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **SUBLIMATION (Species Unique)**

Weakness: UNKNOWN

Vixenair? Dallion wondered.

For some reason, it reminded him of Jirohs cloud pet, only made of magic. For a while, he almost felt guilty of kicking it, though not enough to let it go. Dropping his projection, he drew his harpsisword and dashed towards the creature.

Seeing him, the vixenair transformed into purple mist, letting the harpsisword slash through without dealing any damage. Immediately after, it darted to the mirror in the ceiling, disappearing again.

No, you dont! Dallion split into instances, pressing his arm on half a dozen mirrors.

He was perfectly aware that he wouldnt be able to maintain the effect for more than a few seconds, but that was enough time to determine the path the guardian had taken. The moment he did, he let all other instances fade away and continued chasing the fox.

Good thing it doesnt know more tricks, he thought.

If the guardian was any stronger, it would

Small footprints remained after the vixenair as it ran. Initially, Dallion hadnt given it much thought. But thanks to his perception, he soon noticed that the footprints were, in fact, shaped like symbols. Furthermore, lines emerged between several of them, creating an intricate pattern.

Damn it! Dallion pulled his hand away from the mirror. His projection vanished, just before the entire maze within the mirror world became filled with a series of bouncing lightning bolts. Worse, each time a bolt hit a surface, it split into two.

Layer vision, Dallion leapt forward, tapping the side of his harpsisword against his boot. A split second later, the white glow of a spark lit up the weapon.

There were very few things that could withstand a direct hit from lightning. When it came to magic, however, there were a few things more and a spike infused weapon was one of them.

Spinning around, Dallion struck the lightning bolts surrounding him before they could make contact. The moment they made contact with the harpsisword, causing them to crumble like broken icicles.

For what seemed like minutes, Dallion kept on swinging the harpsisword, like a warrior trying to slice every raindrop in the pouring rain. The impressive thing was that he actually managed. By the time he landed on the floor, all the lightning bolts had gone.

RAIN CUTTER

(+2 Reaction)

Only a master can cut a thousand drops of rain during a storm. If only you were smart enough to avoid the storm to begin with.

A blue rectangle emerged. Normally, that would be a good sign. In the current situation, though, it was only a temporary reprieve. The guardian was still out there, and meaning business.

Well done, dear boy. You almost fight like a war cleric.

Clerics never did anything like this. Dallion jumped to his feet, splitting into half a dozen instances.

On the contrary. You just havent been able to see it.

If I cant see magic, how can they?

There are certain gifts that come with serving the Moons. Better focus on the vixenair for now, though. That is, unless youre considering giving up.

Chapter 659: Further in the Mirror Maze

Cones of quicksand twisted, pulling Dallion in every direction. As he had found out, having the spark allowed him to cut through magic the same way hed cut through void matter. Sadly, it also became quite clear that he wouldnt be able to manage that for long. Casting spells, it seemed, was very different from what the perceptions back on Earth. For one thing, there was nothing like mana involved. Magic just allowed a person, or entity, to perform the manipulation of reality for as little effort as waving a hand. Given enough time, that would become exhausting, but it was a lot easier than waving about a sword and infusing it with spark. If it wasnt for Dallions high body trait, the situation would be a lot more desperate.

A piece of advice, dear boy. Maybe try interrupting a spell before its cast? Nil criticized. I would have thought youd still remember that.

Im trying, Dallion hissed.

The vixenair had already healed itself several times, all the time casting spells with footprints. To make things more annoying, one of the first spells it had done after the mass lightning bolt attack was to multiply to cast spells faster. A whole pack of vixen would run about the various parts of the mirror maze, creating symbols each time a paw touched a surface. The process was considerably slower than what a mage could achieve with fingers, although it produced patterns faster than Dallion could interrupt them. It didnt help that the only way he knew how to disrupt a spell was to kill off a duplicate of the vixenair, causing its respective footprints to fade out.

This would have been a lot easier if I could spell, Dallion thought, while a magic projection dashed along the mirror maze in an attempt to catch up to the guardian.

Youre on just one hit, he said, adding as much slowness and weight in his voice as his music skills would allow. Surrender, and we can avoid this.

Really? Nil sighed. Thats far from your usual approach.

Dallion didnt reply, mainly because it was obvious. Ever since hed received the empathy trait, he had managed to combine it with his music skills to avoid conflict as much as possible. Recent events had changed that somewhat. Negotiating with creatures had become a lot more cumbersome, and it showed.

I just want to clear the artifact, Dallion continued. Wont that set everyone here free?

The guardians ear flicked. It was a barely noticeable action, just enough to show that it was interested, though not enough to surrender or offer a draw. There was a time when Dallion would have felt upset about that. Now, he took advantage of the distraction to press on with his attacks. Dashing along walls, the projection leapt through another mirror along the maze.

Noticing Dallion approach, the vixenair spun around, its feet leaving symbols around it in rapid succession. A sphere of energy emerged around the creature mere fractions of a second before the projection could reach it. The projections fist hit the magic barrier, dealing no damage whatsoever.

Aware that he wouldnt be able to do anything with his current approach, Dallion moved away from the mirror, causing his magic projection to vanish. That wasnt the only thing that had. With the guardians shift to defensive spells, the influx of quicksand cones decreased enough for Dallion to rush to the mirror from where to get a direct view of his enemy.

A ranged attack marker emerged on the surface of the magic bubble.

Got you! Dallion did a point attack infused with spark.

REALM DAMAGED!

Overall completion 54%

Realm damage? Dallion asked.

What did you expect? Nil grunted. Devastating a realm comes with a price. And a magic artifact is made of magic.

Parts of the maze shattered, corridors and reflections twisting like in a kaleidoscope. The bubble around the vixenair popped, unable to take on the force of the attack. Moments later, so did the guardian itself.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Damage dealt is increased by 1000%

AETHERIZER level 1 has been cleared!

Continue to fulfill the AETHERIZERs destiny.

Rectangles appeared and vanished in rapid succession, announcing the defeat of the guardian. For several seconds Dallion just stood there. The euphoria of success failed to materialize.

The mirror blocking the corridor disappeared, revealing a second section that continued for another hundred feet before being blocked by another mirror. The logic was obvious: each level incorporated the last, increasing the challenge difficulty.

Not going to proceed? Nil asked. It was your idea to go through with the leveling up.

It was. I just remembered leveling up being a lot more fun.

The reason wasnt that he had achieved victory through an overpowered skill. It was the effect the skill had on the realmlike using a sledgehammer to remove a fly on a porcelain cup. Without a doubt, the fly was gone not, but so was half of the realm.

With a quiet sigh, Dallion placed his hand on the nearest mirror, then proceeded to mend the realm with his magic projection. The principle of realm repair, thankfully, was the same as with standard items.

Unable to take advantage of his combat splitting, Dallion needed hours to get the realm back in order. The mending maze was firm, thankfully, but changed with each new piece he moved. On one occasion, hed continued to fix things for twenty minutes before having it all ruined by fitting another piece in its place. There was a lot of grumbling and a bit of vocal swearing, but ultimately, the desired rectangle appeared.

Realm section fully mended!

The AETHERIZER is now flawless.

Was the item flawless when I entered? Dallion asked. Thinking back, he couldnt be sure. He hadnt seen any rectangle. Then again, that hadnt been high on his priority.

It was close, but not quite, dear boy. Its not flawless even now, though.

The rectangle says it is.

It might be, but you need to clear the entire item to be certain.

Apparently, that was another quirk of highly magic items. No doubt there would be many more. For the moment, Dallion had other things to worry about, namely the second guardian. There was no telling what it might be, but if the vixenair was an indication, it wasnt going to be an easy opponent.

Making things worse, he'd know quite a bit of Dallion's skills and abilities. In contrast, Dallion had no idea what he was about to face.

If spark harms the realm, what about magic?

Depends on the magic, but usually yes. It's similar to using normal attacks in a standard sphere item. As long as you don't go overboard, things are fine, in most cases. That's why it's usually a better idea to know some actual spellcraft before venturing.

I know some.

You know nothing, dear boy. Or should I say you know as much as you knew about forging when requesting your first hammer? Sure, the number in your realm was different from zero, but how long exactly did it take you to learn to forge a spoon? Just because the skill gem gave you the ability doesn't mean you know how to cast.

The moment Dallion stepped through the invisible line that had been occupied by the mirror before, the entire corridor behind him shattered and reconstructed with four times the number of mirrors. A new labyrinth was formed, one vastly more complicated than before.

Without wasting a moment, Dallion split into three dozen instances and ran to different mirrors along the corridor. This time, when he sent magic projections within the mirror maze, he found there was more than one enemy. Quite different from the previous guardian, the creatures looked a lot less threatening, almost cuddly.

A platypus? Dallion thought. That wasn't a creature he expected to find here, although, come to think of it, it fit right in. From what he remembered, the creature back on earth located prey thanks to electrolocation, suggesting that it would be using electric attacks in addition to its other spells. Without getting it into the real corridor, there was no way for Dallion to be certain of its other skills and abilities.

Combat splitting again, Dallion had several of his projections dash towards the creatures, aiming to check out how it would react.

The purple platypuses didn't even blink. Remaining motionless, till the second Dallion's projection struck them in the head, causing them to fade away. However, no matter the amount of creatures Dallion would destroy with a series of instances, by the next there were just as many, only located in different parts of the labyrinth.

Nox, do you feel anything strange? Dallion asked after the fourth time.

Magic, the cat hissed. Too much magic. It was clear that he wouldn't feel at home in such a realm.

Don't tell me that I must enter the maze myself to fight it, Dallion said.

You don't have to do anything, Nil replied. But then again, neither does the guardian.

How do you want us to do this? Dallion asked. Do I need to pass some trial, or we can go at each other directly?

Thats a novel approach, the old echo admitted.

What are you? The platypus asked. Its voice was high, almost to the point of comical squeakiness.

Never seen a human in your realm before?

You have the seven traits, but youre not a mage. Youve come to this world more than once, but youre not a Moons familiar. Youve got darkness, but youre not the Star. So, what are you exactly?

What darkness? Dallion felt chills throughout his entire body.

Its there, flickering through you and your familiars.

This got Dallion to calm down a bit. No doubt the platypus was referring to Luxs flames, possibly Nox as well. There was no denying that they had been affected by the void. In Noxs case, he remained a crackling, even if different from the common types.

Im just an awakened who got lucky, Dallion replied. What will it take to reach the next level?

Youre like a newborn when it comes to magic. There was no mockery in the creatures voice, nor any other strong emotions. You cant win.

And yet, Im here, Dallion said, resorting to his music skills. I prefer to fight with the final guardian, not you. Itll be a lot easier for everyone.

Spells only kill if theyre stronger than the target theyre used on. Yet, it takes a mountain of strength to pudge a grain of magic.

Wow. Thats a deep notion. Any more bits of wisdom you can offer?

Many, but you wont listen. Youve made a series of bad choices and now can only keep going forward using raw power. The wise would stop, the determinedrest, and the cunning would go back only to return later. Youll do neither of those things.

You sound a lot like an echo I have. Dallion drew his harpsisword and tapped the side of the blade in his leg. Will you come outside, or do I have to charge in to get you?

Stupid questions like that only make it clear how little you know of magic. Vixenair probably went easy on you because of your traits. Youd never have won in

REALM DAMAGED!

Overall completion 74%

Eight mirrors in Dallions immediate vicinity shattered, sliced by a spark slash. Whole paths in the mirror maze blinked out of existence, taking all their branches with them.

Who said Id fight like a mage? Dallion whispered, splitting into three instances. One remained where he was, while the other two went towards different parts of the corridor. Hardly had he done so when mirror fragments emerged in the empty sections on the walls and floor, slowly filling up, until the section was fully restored.

Fight however you wish, but keep in mind that youre not the only one who could repair realms, either.

Realm section fully mended!

The AETHERIZER is now flawless.

Chapter 660: A Little Knowledge

Fragments of glass flew in all directions. However, regardless of the number of mirrors that Dallion would shatter, the platypus would restore them moments later. Neither line attacks, combat splitting, or even the spark were able to do anything about that. Even when Dallion managed through the combination of five skills to destroy half of the mirror maze, only one mirror failed to get repaired.

Why arent you attacking? Dallion asked as he sent a magic projection through a mirror once more.

Why should I attack? The guardian asked in turn. Youre the one who needs to continue forward. I just have to stop you.

That was one of the worst answers Dallion had heard, but at the same time he could understand the meaning behind it. The guardian wasnt interested in fighting, so he did everything possible to avoid fighting. Normally, that would give Dallion the opportunity to hunt him down until cornered. Magic changed all that. Not only was the platypus untouchable and unreachable in the mirror maze, but he also used spells to repair any damage done to the realm. Even after fifteen minutes of intense fighting, one could barely tell that any fighting had taken place. In contrast, Dallion was on the brink of exhaustion.

I told you you were weak, the guardian said. Just go and come back in a few decades when youre strong enough to handle the pressure.

Without warning, Dallion dashed further along the corridor. Reaching the vertical mirror blocking it off, he then turned around.

Line attack, he whispered as leapt towards the right wall.

His harpsisword split the air, but this was more than a slash attack. Dallion pushed himself off the wall to the ceiling, then the other wall, all the time maintaining the attack. Strictly speaking it remained a line, but as Dallion was caught back in school, the spiral could also be a line, just not a straight one.

Mirrors exploded almost in unison as the destruction went down the corridor. But that wasnt all. The moment Dallion set foot on the ground, he took a step backwards until the back of his head touched the final mirror. The magic within him swelled, spreading through his head to create a projection.

REALM DAMAGED!

Overall completion 1%

What about now? His projection thrust forward.

A single platypus stood on the other side of the mirrored corridorthe only one remaining. All the rest had gone along with the branching corridors of the maze. Now that all but a mirror had been destroyed, there was no maze, and the guardian had no time to fix it.

Before even a targeting marker could appear, Dallion struck at the guardians head. The moment the hand of his project made contact it popped out of existence.

What the heck?! Dallion turned around and looked into the mirror.

The platypus was still there, standing innocently on the far side of the corridor behind his reflection, as if nothing had happened. There was no trace of the magic projection Dallion had created. Something told him that if he were to make a second attempt, the outcome would be no different.

Nice try, the guardian said and slid the entire mirror forward, slamming Dallion in the face. When Dallion blinked next, he suddenly found himself back in class, holding the artifact.

Is anything the matter, Dallion? the fury instructor asked.

Dallion looked up. To some degree he could tell that he was back in the real world, but it all seemed somehow fake, as it was the final moment of a dream.

You're bleeding.

Bleeding? Dallion wiped his nose with his left hand, then looked at it. There was a visible trail of blood on it. Moments later there was more, as droplets fell from his nostril into his palm.

I'm bleeding, Dallion agreed, then collapsed forward.

Everything went dark. In the last few moments Dallion heard a huge commotion fill the class. The fury must have loosened his silence grip, for children's voices were everywhere. There was no way to tell what exactly they were talking about, but they were scared.

Talk about embarrassing, Dallion thought before completely passing out.

The next time Dallion opened his eyes, he was back in bed. At least it felt like his bed. Everything else in the room was completely different. Ten-foot windows covered all walls, flooding the room with sunlight. Dallion's initial reaction was to shield his eyes, but after a few seconds, he found that he didn't mind. The light was warm and soft, and for some reason, didn't seem to bother his eyes in the least.

You're awake, a stern voice said.

Dallion looked to the side. A mage in a simple white robe was standing just by the bed. Strange that Dallion hadn't noticed him earlier.

When they told me you'd come, I'd hoped it would take you a few weeks before you unleash your chaos.

The man didn't seem overly imposing, but his magic definitely was glowing to the point that it almost went beyond his body. Even so, Dallion was able to see the mage's physical features, along with the faint shimmering covering them.

You're an otherworlder, he whispered.

Since youre new, Ill let that slide. My official title is Great Mage Enroy, which youll be using should we ever meet.

Careful, dear boy, Nil said. That isnt someone you want to see the bad side of.

Dallion didnt need any reminding to know that. Rotten attitude aside, he already knew that there was only one fraction of otherworlder mages in the Academy. He had already faced three of them. This had to be another, and there was no way hed be pleased with everything Dallion had done in the past.

Why did you enter a magical artifact during class? the mage asked.

That was the task of the assignment.

A flash of anger emanated from Enroy. Without explanation, he drew an intricate pattern in the air. The speed of his fingers was so great that Dallion couldnt even follow the symbols he was drawing. All he knew was that there were over a hundred of them.

A ball of purple light appeared in the air, quickly falling to the ground. Moments after he did, the fury apprentice emerged a step away from him.

Palag, what assignment did you give the novices? The man crossed his arms.

Weve reached the consuming phase with his group, sir, the fury replied in apologetic fashion. I was of the opinion that some practical meddling would

Magic consumption, Enroy said loudly, turning back to Dallion. Not entering artifacts.

I thought that was the way to do it, sir.

The silence that followed felt like an arctic chill. Rendered incapable of speech, the white-robed mage glanced at the fury, then back at Dallion, then just left the room. Several seconds later, Palag used an air current to close the door.

Ill talk to admin to shuffle your classes a bit, he said after a while.

That bad? Dallion closed his eyes.

Yes, and no. You made a mistake so basic that there arent rules concerning it. No doubt thatll change now. You dont enter magical artifacts until youre level twenty.

I passed that ages ago. Dallion smirked.

Not your awakening level. When someone says level here, its understood its magic level. To go for such an item at level two Youre lucky to be alive.

Dallion still had his hunters emblem on, but decided to remain quiet. For someone so high up in the hierarchy to come check on him, this had to have been a serious blunder. Either that, or they were wondering whether the aetherbird hadnt given him some special abilities.

My Moon vow forbids me from saying the solution to the task, but what you did definitely not it. Next time, try something simpler.

Yes, instructor Palag. Dallions normal voice made the response earn him a chuckle. Did the item survive?

Its in your room, along with your other belongings. Ill give you a new one in class tomorrow.

Why a new one? Dallion opened his eyes.

Thats not something I can say, but you better keep it close at hand. Consider it some friendly advice. Now, get some rest. I must head back to class.

The door opened and closed again, leaving Dallion completely alone.

He was lying, you know, Nil said.

The mage?

The apprentice. The reason you get to keep the item is because of Academy rules. Of course, you need to be a mage, or at worst a high ranked apprentice, to know that, so its better just to keep you in the dark and not say anything.

Is it some special honor thing?

Its definitely special. Aetherizers are magic keys that grant a mage access to magic domains. You dont have anywhere the skill or even the imagination to know what that means, but since you managed to unlock a level, the key is considered yours.

The explanation was enough to make Dallion attempt to sit up. The pain and exhaustion resulting in that forced him back down in his bed. He was perfectly aware that he wasnt even close on clearing the item, let alone use it, but the mere suggestion that he could enter magic domains filled him with enthusiasm, as if someone was urging him to go on this journey, consequences be damned.

Whats beyond the lock?

I think Ive told you enough for now. Get some rest, get better, and never try what you did again. And no, none of your guardians will help you out on this. Feel free to ask if you think Im lying.

I trust you. Dallion adjusted his head on the pillow. So, back to class tomorrow?

Back to class. And prepare to be ridiculed. While the way you fainted was impressive, its nowhere near as impressive as the taunts that it could generate.

Alas, Nils prediction turned out to be quite true. When Dallion returned to class the next day, he was instantly greeted by a combination of mockery and whispers. Phoil and his group were quick to make up for their humiliation at lunch by pouring insults as fast as possible before the instructor arrived. The rest of the students whispered amongst themselves, speculating on what could have caused him to bleed and faint in class. One interesting change was that the black-haired noble was no longer present. After a while, the reason for that became clear. Apparently, two of the children had managed to consume the magic of the artifact in Dallions absence, earning them a magic level, as well as the rest of the week off. Meanwhile, everyone else was back to doing the usual task.

As few artifacts were handed out, Dallion couldnt help but feel a sense of anxiety. He knew that he was in the real world, but at the same time he also couldnt forget the power of the guardians within. It took reciting the names of the Seven Moons for him to calm down enough to pick up the artifact. A few minutes later, the pondering began.

Going through everything he'd learned about magic, Dallion placed his hand on either side of the disk, then extended the magic from his hand to go inside. Unlike before, though, he was no longer using it as extensions of his fingers, but as a projection of his entire arm that grabbed hold of the magic thread and pulled it within him.

A deep purple glow surrounded him for a split second, along with a purple rectangle.

MAGIC ABSORBED

Your MAGIC trait is now 3

That was it? Dallion thought in disbelief, as the artifact in his hand lost its glow and started to slowly crumble to pieces like a dried up cookie.

I told you this was meant for ten-year-olds, Nil laughed. Think simple, at least until you become an apprentice. Then you'll have more than enough challenges to keep you occupied.

Well done, Dallion. The fury went up to him with a nod. Keep in mind what you've learned today. This is the immediate way to increase your magic. You're free to have the rest of the day off. I suggest you spend it in the library reading everything you weren't able to before.