

Leveling up 661

Chapter 661: Alliance Proposal

The number of readable books in the library had increased by a fair amount. Looking at the way the shelves and sections were structured, the books were based on level. Based on the books that were still blank, one could assume that more of them would appear at every level increase. The apprentice section, on the other hand, seemed a lot more uniform in nature, if considerably larger. According to Nil, it was a safe bet to assume that once Dallion reached level twenty, he'd be able to read almost everything at the Academy. Beyond that point, it wasn't a matter of finding information, but having the skill to use it in a new and more efficient fashion. Mages at least the high-ranking ones tended to focus exclusively on item creation than actual spells. The few that did were quietly mocked as useless academics.

Grabbing as many books as he could carry, Dallion made his way to a small table in a quiet section of the library and started reading. He clearly wasn't the only one interested in increasing his magic trait; a number of books on the topic were also taken, including one titled *A Historic Overview of Magic Duels*. No doubt someone was already thinking of using that method to score a few points.

Nil, what happens if I pass a threshold value with my magic trait, then level up?

You're asking me something magic related while in a library? The echo scoffed.

Someone's taken the leveling books.

Oh. Nil cleared his throat. Well, in addition to gate benefits typical of other traits, magic also allows you to interact with more powerful sources. You'll learn more on that later, Moons willing, but the basic principle is that you can always interact with magic that is weaker than yours, but never with magic that is stronger.

Dallion rolled his eyes. This had nothing to do with the question he had asked. Complaining, however, was only guaranteed to get more useless explanations. This was one aspect the echo hadn't changed since Dallion had received him all those years ago back in Hannah's inn.

Losing a level, though whatever means, will instantly render you unable to interact with magic you've been able to.

Fascinating, Dallion groaned.

The term you are searching for is dangerous. Let us assume that you're already reacting with magic at your level. What do you think would happen if you lose a level then?

I won't be able to

You won't be able to feel your hands and legs for years, if at all! The old echo finished the sentence for him. With magic, interaction isn't a one-way street. Even now, you're only able to pull magic out of small items because the items acknowledge your strength and allow themselves to gravitate towards you.

Imagine holding a boiling kettle with a thick glove. What would happen if the glove suddenly vanishes?

This time, Dallion was a lot more attentive. The image of pain flashed through his mind.

Its similar with magic. Sometimes its better, sometimes its worse, but there always is a penalty depending on the nature of the magic youre interacting with. And Im not talking about poking around with threads as you are now. Anyone with a magic value of one could do that. Its other things I have in mind. A good rule of thumb is to be at least five levels higher than the thing you wish to interact with, just in case.

And the trait bonuses?

Thats not so clear cut. On the one hand, you should lose them similar to blocked skills. However, with enough strength and effort, its possible to still be able to make use of them. Thats a matter more for the Order than anyone else. Id tell you one thing, though. I wouldnt attempt to level up before becoming an apprentice. Think of that what you will.

Seven more magic improvements before going for a level up. It wasnt that much. Dallion could wait. By then, hed have a far better understanding of spells and magic, using them to his advantage.

A smile on face, he focused back on his books. Other than a new set of strength and speed values linked to pulling magic from different materials, hed also learned of natural magic deposits scattered all over the world. Referred to as teardrops, they were foci of magic energy that appeared for a short period of time, slowly evaporating into the surrounding environment. At present, leading scholars believed them to emerge as the rays of the Purple Moon interacting with elements in the world. While not overly common, they werent an unusual occurrence and a means for mages to quickly boost their initial magic traits. The issue, rather, was that since they also were a source of free magic, more powerful mages tended to extract them and place the magic in magic cubes for later use.

Thinking of leveling up? someone whispered from the other side of the novice section. Looking up, Dallion instantly saw the black-haired noble.

The boy was sitting on his own, holding a single large tome. To Dallions surprise, the cover was completely blank.

Theres no point, the boy whispered on. His lips were barely moving, but he was confident that Dallion was able to hear him, even from that distance.

Must be nice having an army of echoes always guiding you, Dallion thought, then stood up, took his books, and went all the way to the others table.

Can I join you? he asked in exceedingly polite fashion.

A simple nod suggested that the offer had been accepted.

What are you reading? Dallion asked, glancing at the book.

Poetry, the other replied. The bouquet of emotions made it impossible to tell whether he was joking or telling the truth.

Why is there no point in leveling up?

Experience and expectations. The boy closed the book. Being a novice is the only time when all mess-ups are forgiven. That means while we're still here, we can experiment with anything and get away with it. Just like you did.

The whole thing didn't feel like getting away, but Dallion could appreciate the point. It wasn't a perspective he had considered. Now that he did, things were starting to look somewhat different. It was quite possible that he wasn't the most proficient in class, not by a long shot. The black-haired mafic was at least level four, and there was no telling how many more of the class were pretending to be less talented than they actually were.

What was it like? the noble asked, curiosity emanating from him like a fountain.

Fainting?

Leveling up a magic item. I know you did.

Given that it had only been a day, Archdukes had considerable means and connections to find that out. Considering they had mages on their employ, it wasn't all that surprising. It also raised a scary point. Archduke Lanitol also had similar means and influence. Even with his conflict against Countess Priscord, it would be easy for him to make a few requests to the appropriate mages and find out what Dallion was up to. While the Academy took care of their own, information remained easy to get.

I didn't, Dallion replied. The guardian got me. Using only non-magic skills isn't enough. Even with weapons.

Really? I thought you'd managed.

Nope. Maybe after a while. Are you thinking of trying?

No, not for now. I must become an apprentice first. I can hire you when the time comes, the boy added.

Wonderful. Maybe. There's lots of time till then. Is there anything you want me to help you with now? Dallion asked out of politeness. There was nothing he could offer right now, either as a mage or as a hunter.

I want us to enter an alliance while we're novices, the boy said.

Dallion didn't budge an inch, but inside he was surprised, even alarmed. He'd heard more than his share of rumors and stories regarding politics in the Academy. Considering that the boy was also related to an Archduke, such a deal made it the worst in both worlds.

Only until you remove your seal.

I know I promised that I would

This has nothing to do with you being a hunter. The noble took a pencil from the table and offered it to Dallion with his left hand. The offer was clear.

I really must stop getting involved with everything, Dallion said to himself and grabbed hold of the other end of the pencil.

ITEM AWAKENING

The library disappeared. Instead, Dallion found himself standing in an elegant wooden room with hand carved furniture. The noble was there, as were two echoes. One of them was a high-high level awakened glad in full armora bodyguard, no doubt. The other was a woman in her late thirties, in an attire made of ruby and onyx threads. One look was enough for Dallion to guess that she was a mage.

Were grateful that you accepted the young masters request, Mister Darude, the woman said.

I havent accepted anything yet, Dallion replied, surprised for a moment by the deepness of his voice. I just said that Id hear him out. Or you, it seems.

In that case, Ill get straight to the point. The alliance that the young master is offering isnt a job, or an offer of fealty, it is a request made among fellow mages. To be specific, between fellow novices.

So thats what it is? Dallion looked around, then made his way to the nearest chair and sat down. He doubted the conversation would be long, but he had every intention of showing that in this instance, he held all the cards.

Traditionally, you will go through a series of lessons, assignments, and practical tests outside the Halls of Learning, until you learn what is required to remove your seal. Knowing you, youll probably attempt to do that as quickly as possible. As things stand, the only thing that separates you from rank two is two magic levels.

I thought that mages werent allowed to share any knowledge.

Im not. These are Academy standards. There are apprentices whove depleted their magic back to one due to reckless duels. For example, in order to remove your seal, your magic trait has to be at least twenty.

Dallion nodded.

Our request is that you delay climbing up the ranks for a while. You see, there are certain things that not all novices are told upon entering the Academy.

This alliance, for example?

The bodyguards hand moved closer to the hilt of his weapon. The action was subtle, but clearly visible. The man wanted Dallion to know just how skilled he was and that disrespect towards the young master wouldnt be tolerated in the future.

After reaching rank three, novices are allowed to request a trial of skill. The practice has been abandoned for over three centuries, but its still valid. As youve no doubt surmised, if the request comes from certain people, it will be granted.

Of course, it would, Dallion thought.

However, that isnt enough to guarantee success.

As Ive already told the young master, Dallion glanced at the boy, my skills are lacking when it comes to magic. It was slightly embarrassing to think that he had managed to defeat the Purple Moons familiar, but failed upon facing the first magic trinket within the Academy.

For now, they are, but you have the potential to develop them to the needed level by the appropriate time. Naturally, you won't be alone. Three other novices have already joined the alliance. It's possible that other alliances might form as well.

So, it'll be a friendly competition?

No, Mister Darude, it's not a competition. It's actually the complete opposite. Each group has the chance to earn its own prize, just as everyone within the young masters alliance will obtain the same reward.

Something didn't feel right. Secrecy aside, it all seemed too simple and cooperative. From the memory fragments Dallion had seen, mages tended to betray each other with incredible ease, even within the same faction. Put in a few drops of nobility in the mix, and one had a catastrophe waiting to happen.

I take it the reward is more than prestige? Dallion looked the mage in the eyes.

Quite a bit more. Tell me, Mister Darude, are you familiar with the term Moonstones?

I've heard it mentioned.

Technically, it wasn't a lie. While being a hunter, he'd come across the term, though knew no details whatsoever. The presence of the word Moon as part of the name suggested that the items were extremely rare and expensive. Unfortunately, that exhausted knowledge on the topic.

They're gems made of the essence of the Moons. Just like the seven special metals, they can allow items from the real world to be used within the realms, but also so much more. Does that make the request worthy of you, Mister Darude?

Even if the objects were half as impressive as advertised, there was no way anyone would refuse such an offer. The necessity for a group to complete the challenge rather than a single individual suggested that the difficulty would be relatable to the prize.

Just to be clear, provided we succeed in this, all four novices will get some Moonstones?

One Moonstone each, just one. However, we're not talking about any Moonstone. The prize is Galateas amethyst.

Chapter 662: Extracurricular

Still hiding in the library? Phoel asked with a nasty grin as he passed by Dallion in the dining room.

Naturally, Dallion ignored him. The large kid wasn't worth his time. Getting into conflicts right now would only cause needless annoyances.

Better make the most of it. I completed the assignment as well. The boy continued.

It was difficult to say whether he was hoping to gain someone's favor or was simply spoiled and stupid. As a noble, he probably had a small army of echoes in his domain, instructing him what to do and what not to. The fact that he was ignoring them so eagerly led Dallion to the conclusion that was part of a newly established noble family. All it took was one person to pass the level eighty-mark and a dozen more people would join the ranks of nobility, largely unmerited.

What about the rest? Dallion gave him a quick glance, finishing his soup.

What rest?

Did your friends also complete the task?

The momentary silence suggested that they hadn't. Meanwhile, the lack of angry outbursts told him that Phoel wasn't as stupid as he made himself out to be. With a grumble he walked past, going to his table where the rest of the posse awaited.

Dallion swallowed the last few spoonfuls of food, then stood up and left the dining room. There was no point in bothering with the dishes one of the advantages of trying to level up a magic artifact was being granted special privileges.

No sooner had Dallion entered the corridor, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Glancing in the direction, he saw the almost invisible presence of a controlled air current.

Good to see that you spent your time well, the fury Palag appeared a step away. Ready to go on a trip?

Has it been four days already? Dallion asked. For once time seemed to fly by. It felt like only moments ago when he'd promised the apprentice to assist with a matter on the outside.

The polite smile on the instructor's face made it clear that it had.

Ready when you are, sir.

Good. Let's go get your gear.

Getting dressed in his hunter outfit brought back memories. Even with the time spent in the awakened realms, it'd only been a week since he'd gained the magic trait. Looking back, it felt like an eternity. It took Dallion a bit of effort to try to remember the world without all the purple traces of magic.

Come along, Ruby. Dallion strapped on the armadil shield to his left hand. It's time to go hunting again.

The shardfly flew off the ceiling its preferred spot and landed on Dallion's shoulder. Splitting into half a dozen instances, Dallion took one final look throughout the room to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything, then went back to the corridor.

Palag was patiently waiting outside. Possibly due to that, this time Dallion didn't change into the ten-year-old version of himself.

You got permission to disable my seal? he asked.

The advantages of being a novice instructor. Let's go.

The two made their way through the vast corridors. Soon they were in a section that Dallion didn't know anything about. The number of mages increased, the magic within them shining so brightly that it almost looked like a skeleton of purple light. Now and again someone would glance at Dallion, the curiosity ringing as loud as a bell. Clearly, novices weren't expected in that section of the building.

After close to an hour, Palag led them to an alternative exit, leading to a small guardian on the other side of the Study Hall. The number of people was a lot less here, and the houses were almost non-existent.

Have you flown before? the apprentice asked, air currents surrounding him and Dallion.

A bit. Dallion chose not to go into details. No sooner had he done so than the air currents lifted him in the air, dragging him behind the fury. The acceleration was fast, though not as fast as Jirohs and nowhere close to what Lux was capable of. As Dallion got a sense of what it was to fly, he almost got sick thinking how reckless he had been in the past.

Ignorance is bliss, he told himself as the buildings of the academy disappeared behind him.

Itll take us half a day to get there, Palag said. Hold on to your lunch.

It was a well-established fact that furies enjoyed the freedom of open spaces. This one must have been cooked up in the academy for quite a while, for he was enjoying himself more than Dallion himself. However, there was more to it. The duty had made some attempts to block the emotions emanating from him. However, against a skill of eighty there was little he could do. Regardless of how he was presenting this small trip, Dallion was starting to get the impression that it was a lot more important to the apprentice than he was letting on. In fact, there were faint traces of desperation mixed in with the rest of his emotions.

Can we talk about the task now, sir? Dallion asked.

I want you to help me find a creature. Find and subdue.

That still sounded vaguer than Dallion preferred. Any details you could give me, instructor?

Theres nothing more I can give you. There was a sighting after an expedition. Ive never seen it in person.

Expedition? Dallion asked.

Its a common term for a whole variety of different things, Nil explained. For now, consider it as a standard expedition into an unknown part of the real world.

Got you. If neither of us have seen it, how will we find it exactly?

Magic resonance. The creatures magic is rather unique. I was lucky to come across it when assisting my mage and have been following it ever since. If it wasnt for the news surrounding your circumstances, Id have gone to try and find it on my own, but with your obvious skills on the table, I decided to wait a bit longer.

It was clear as day that there was a lot more to the story, but as every hunter knew there were some details that were better left ignored. Dallion wasnt here to judge, he was here to do a job and hopefully get something in return.

You said that it would take me a few months to up my rank. Why that long? I already know the basics?

You know some of the theory, the fury corrected. Usually, itll take you that long to gather the necessary magic to up your level to the point that you can become a rank two novice. Why do you think Ive taught you placing magic in items? For the next few months, you and the rest of the class would be extracting threads of magic bit by bit and placing them in the empty disks you have. Once you gather

enough, you'll consume it and keep on going until you know you're ready to move to the next stage.

That sounded beyond boring. Dallion knew exactly what was going on. This was the equivalent of him learning how to make metal ingots before he could forge items. The books in the library focused on that.

Help me find the creature and it'll go a lot faster.

That's my reward? Magic?

What else do you need?

As time passed, the landscape underneath went through changes. Fields turned into forests, then mountainous rocks. Using his magic layer vision, Dallion was able to see how large areas completely depleted of magic, like giant splashes of nothing. To little surprise, the direction they were headed at followed the depleted spots.

When the sun began to set, Palag slowed down, bringing them to the ground.

Why did we stop? Dallion asked.

It's not safe to fly after dark. There are nasty creatures in the area. Also, I don't want us to become casualties of war.

The wars reached all the way here?

A momentary burst of alarm came from the fury. So, things weren't going as well as everyone claimed. Back south, the only focus of concern was the inevitable civil war of Wetie province. Everyone had heard rumors that fighting had increased further south, but no one knew the exact degree. Even Dallion assumed that it was only the border areas of the northern provinces that were affected. For fighting to have come half a day from the Imperial Capital, things were rather dire. Could that be why the Emperor was tolerating Countess Priscord's ambitions?

No, the fury lied. We still have to be careful.

Hunting is a lot better after dark for someone like me. We stand a better chance of approaching the. We'll rest till morning, Palag said firmly. Have some food and some rest.

There was nothing that could be done. With a nod, Dallion sat on the ground. A few seconds later, the apprentice drew a symbol in the air, which turned into a campfire. If nothing else, he wasn't afraid of it being discovered by the creature or any non-mages. The fury then cast a few more spells and joined Dallion. Plates of food emerged around the fire, including one full of chunks of water.

Hello, Dallion said as he took a piece of water and put it into his mouth. The fragment instantly regained its liquid form, allowing him to swallow it. Are we the only ones about?

Hello! Hello! A chorus of grass replied, soon followed by other plants among the rocks. You can talk!

Yes, I can talk. Clearly, no empath had been in this part of the world for a long time. What happened here?

Rocks happened. The grass replied. Rocks and monsters. You better watch out! Some are close.

Was that what the fury had brought Dallion to catch?

What monsters?

Black shadows. They slice everything they touch. There were none of them, but then a crack appeared in the ground and they came out.

A crack? Did anyone cause it to appear?

No, it just emerged. It wasn't there, and then it was.

So much for all Starspawn ceasing to exist with the destruction of the Star. Still, since it was only cutlings, it wasn't a matter of concern.

Let me know when they approach, Dallion said, and took another chunk of water.

They're close. They're close.

Well, tell them when they get closer.

How large is the creature? Dallion asked. Or is that something you don't know, either?

Im not sure. Its smaller than a carriage. It might be smaller than a person.

Are we hunting it or is it hunting us?

What do you mean?

If its the hunter it'll charge the moment it sees us. If its smart, it might try to set up a trap. If its running away, we need to take the initiative.

The fury remained silent for half a minute, as if going through the options in his head.

Were hunting it, he said at last. Its been running, so it'll continue to run. Im not sure what it'll do when it gets cornered.

Creatures always attack when cornered. Ill take the lead. Youll follow a short distance away, preferably in the sky. If

They're here! They're here! A chorus of whispers filled the air.

Fly up! Dallion jumped to his feet, then burst in fifty instances.

He could already sense the cutlings approaching a whole back, mowing everything they ran through.

Lux, keep an eye out, Dallion said. On the second, his bladebow rose into the air, surrounded by blue flames. Meanwhile, Dallion drew his harpsisword and tapped its blade on his knee.

Whats happening? the fury asked, unaware of the events taking place.

I said, hide in the sky. A pack of cutlings is heading this way. Theres at least a dozen of them.

Two dozen, Lux corrected.

Two dozen were more than Dallion had seen roam in the wilderness. Whatever event had caused them to appear, it must have been considerable. That was a concern for another time. Right now, he had monsters to deal with.

Chapter 663: Reality Chameleon

The first half of the pack came running straight forward. It was obvious they hadnt encountered a hunter before. There was no sign of fear in their actions. Three of them leapt straight at Dallion as if he were a blade of grass. That proved to be a mistake. One swift spark attack later and all three of them fell to the ground, turning into ash. Unused to such a result, the rest of the dozen paused. Dallion could almost hear the confusion coming within them. The wild nature of the cutlings drove them to keep on mercilessly fighting. The sight they had witnessed attempted to instill caution.

Line attack, Dallion thought.

A glowing thread flew towards the horizon, poofing half of the pack out of existence. It was only upon reaching the second half that it was partially avoided. Four cutlings were caught nonetheless. The remaining eight quickly scattered, charging at Dallion from a different direction.

Too easy, he thought.

Splitting into instances, he dashed towards the nearest cutling, slicing it in two as he flew past. The corpse had barely turned to dust when Dallion charged on to the next. Like a thread weaving through cloth, Dallion made his way through the surrounding space, clashing against the monsters one by one. There wasnt a single unnecessary action, no opening for them to take advantage of.

In less than a minute, the last of the pack had gone, killed like all the rest. Yet, that didnt make Dallion feel fully at ease.

Lux, scout a bit, he said to the bladebow. Keep your distance. There might be other things out there.

Yes, boss! The firebird replied, darting its item through the air.

Is that normal? Now that the danger was over, the fury descended from the sky. Ive never seen a single person fight off that many.

They were inexperienced, Dallion replied, putting his harpsisword away.

Thats good for us. Time for some rest, then.

Dallion nodded, even if he couldnt agree less. The only reason for so many cutlings to pack together was because something stronger was out theresomething that had leaked into the world along with them. It was obvious that it had to do with Palags expedition, whatever that was. The bigger question was why the apprentice mage remained so vague about it.

Shield, keep an eye open, he whispered as he lay on the ground.

Same as always, I guess, the dryad guardian replied. I cant guarantee Ill be as efficient as before. Im not magic.

Just do your best.

Sleep was brief and uncomfortable, full of nightmares. Magic tended to add a new wrinkle to the mix of usual weirdness. The number of dreams about Earth had decreased, replaced by upper chaos. The difference was that now the chaos somehow made sense, not in a way Dallion could explain, but in a way that felt normal; like watching origami from the point of view of the piece of paper.

This time, the dream involved magic threads. Dallion found himself in a world of marionettes. He was walking along the streets of Nerosalas he had many times in the past. Glowing threads fell from the sky, connecting everyone to the Purple Moon. While everything seemed normal, Dallion was never sure whether it was the people who controlled the threads, or the threads were controlling the people. The moment he had tried to break one of the threads, though, the dream had ended and Dallion was back on the field moments after sunrise. The fury was still asleep, floating ten feet from the ground, surrounded by three protective spheres of magic.

Its all fine, the armadil shield said. Nothing approached, and he spent all the time sleeping.

Thats not exactly fine. Dallion stood up, stretched, then looked around.

The terrain looked very different in the morning. Traces of the cutling fight were everywhere, like tire tracks through a rocky field. As far as Dallion could tell the creatures had come from the northeast, and they lacked sophistication to leave fake trails. If it were up to him, hed immediately follow the trail. However, part of being a hunter was following the exact instructions of people with a far lesser understanding.

Palag, Dallion shouted.

The sounds bounced off the external magic sphere, pausing it to change color. The furys eyes opened. Moving into a standing position mid-air, he slowly descended to the ground, spheres dissolving as he did so.

Its morning, Dallion stated. Time to continue.

Dallion was expecting a series of complaints, or at the very least, a request for food. Instead, the fury nodded, lifting both in the air.

That was some fight last night, he said as the two flew over the cracklings trail. Looks like someone dragged a dozen swords through the ground.

Something like that. Dallion could tell the apprentice was nervous. Based on past experience, he also knew that hed likely never get a better opportunity to press with information. So, about that creature? He subtly added a bit of calm and self-confidence in his words. Did it enter this world with the cutlings?

No. They came as a result. My mage wanted to get as much from the vortex as possible. Some of the other apprentices were too eager. There was a momentary pause. Myself included. Things were done faster than they should have been. As a result, something broke out.

Dallion knew next to nothing about mages in the grand scheme of things, but this sounded something they would typically do: make a mess and leave it for someone else to fix.

And you dont know what it looks like?

No.

And your mage is not interested in finding it?

Things are a bit complicated. Youll learn soon enough. Its not that he doesnt want to, but doing so would put him in a bad position. If I were to capture the creature, it would be to everyones benefit.

That sounded unlikely.

And youre sure no hunter has captured it so far?

No requests have been made and with the war raging in the area, the imperial legions arent focused on creatures as much as before. Its out there, I can feel it.

Hopefully, that feeling is more than intuition. So, how do we proceed?

Well go to the point of the expedition and track it from there.

Although the fury made it seem that they were close, the trip lasted over three more hours. Dallions suspicions turned out to be rightthe cutlings had emerged from the spot in question. Their disorganized trails almost made a perfect circle on the rocky terrain. In the middle of it, though, lay nothing. Well, almost nothing. While there was nothing physical, even now Dallion could see the faint magic remnants, like torn up blueprints of a building.

Dont touch the magic, Palag said the moment they landed on the spot.

Sure. Dallion never had any intention of doing so. This was the entrance? he asked.

Yes.

I dont see any tracks. Dallion walked about, carefully examining the outside of the circle. Only cutlings.

It wouldnt have left any physical trail.

Less than a few moments later, Dallion found proof that the fury was wrong. Among the lines left by the cutlings paws, there were a series of dots. A few of them in isolation one would think nothing of it, but looking at more a pattern began to emerge, a pattern that didnt look like anything else Dallion had seen so far. If anything, it almost seemed as if made by something mechanical like chains.

Palags hands moved about, drawing symbols in the air. Several circles formed, then merged together, creating an intricate shape that collapsed on itself within moments. Hopefully, that was an expected result.

This way, the fury said, continuing on foot.

Is it a good idea for you to be in front? Dallion arched a brow. Theres no telling what its capable of.

The question made Palag stop mid step, then gesture for Dallion to move ahead of him.

Youll need to stay close. Its a jumper.

Several minutes later, Dallion got to learn exactly what that meant. As they were walking through the rocky terrain, following the invisible trail that only the fury could see, suddenly everything shifted. It was similar to entering a realm, but different. The closest Dallion could associate it with was the method of travel the cultists had used. It was different, of course. While the void travel felt like floating through a sea of reality, this felt like suddenly being pulled to an entirely new location.

Like unfolding paper, Dallion thought, pausing.

You didnt throw up, the fury said, impressed. It usually takes a few times for people to get used to the shock. You must have gone through something similar before?

Not helping. Yeah. Something similar. He nodded, finding it a blessing he hadnt eaten on the last day.

Dont worry. It gets easier further on.

Following the creature turned into a series of walks and jumps. Thanks to Lux, who remained in the sky, Dallion was able to get a general idea of where he was going. After a while, it became clear that the creature they were hunting had no sense of physical direction. From its point of view, it was traveling along a straight line, following a very specific goal. However, in terms of the physical world, it squiggled about the area, like a spitting top at half momentum. The only constant was that it kept moving away from its entry point in this world.

It would help if we knew where its going, Dallion said. No matter how fast we are, catching up doesnt always work.

Itll work. The creatures slow.

Does it drain magic?

Im not sure. Maybe.

So far, they hadnt come across animal remains, which was a positive sign. At least it wasnt a predator. The terrain also seemed largely undisturbed, suggesting it didnt have chainling-like powers. Maybe it was nothing but a harmless creature that the fury wanted in order to score a few points in front of his mage?

Stop! Dallion suddenly said, bursting into instances. Several of them grabbed hold of Palags shoulder, forcing him to stop. Thankfully, the warning was understood without Dallion having to choose them to become reality.

Why? the fury whispered. What happened?

It changed its pattern. Dallion bent down, looking at the trail of dots on the ground. So far, it always moved in a straight line. This time it turned.

Youre wrong. I clearly see

Its been leaving a physical trail, Dallion interrupted. That means it has a physical body.

Where?

The bigger question remained what had caused the change. Dallion reached out to the new plants of the area, asking for information. While quite chatty, they proved to be useless. As far as they were concerned, the last creatures to pass by were a group of soldiers months ago. Since then, not even an insect had gone by. The moment he heard that, Dallion already knew that he was close to talking into a trap.

Ruby, are there any illusions? He drew his harpsisword. With one swift continuous action, he dashed to the fury, grabbing hold of him with his left hand, then swung his weapon, doing a three-sixty line attack.

A series of cracking sounds filled the air, as half of the attack slammed into an invisible barrier. Finding the distance to it closer than he'd like, Dallion quickly pulled back, just in time for a series of magic symbols to form in the air.

No, the shardfly replied. I can't sense any illusions.

That idiot! Nil shouted within Dallion's realm. That bloody idiot!

What did he do? Dallion pulled back more, doing a point attack straight forward. The attack slammed into the air, causing a faint crack to appear in the sky.

He let a reality chameleon loose and didn't even bother to try and catch it! There are mages that have spent decades of their lives in an attempt to capture such a creature, and the idiot that is the fury's mage had it drop in his lap, just to let it go.

What the heck is a reality chameleon? Dallion shouted. The moment he did, the ground beneath him shot up, changing into a cliffy mountain.

Chapter 664: Symbiot Echo

Air currents strengthened around Dallion, keeping him from smashing into the ground. It wasn't as elegant or intuitive as flying with Lux, but it did the job.

Palag's fingers danced in the air, drawing symbol after symbol. There was a time when Dallion would have found the speed impressive. After having faced three powerful mages, though, it was like watching amateur hour. The fury was undoubtedly far better than Dallion, but it was obvious he was struggling against their enemy. This was also the first time that Dallion had witnessed spells being broken. The method was quite different from what Dallion had been doing. So far, both his own awakening trials and Nil had taught him that the best way to end a spell was to interrupt the mage midway. The reality chameleon took a more direct approach, breaking the lines of the spell circle with its own spells, causing the whole thing to fizzle away.

Gripping his harpsisword, Dallion did another spark-infused line attack. The flash cut through the air currents, continuing to the mountain range. Same as before, it clashed against the walls of stone, slicing off huge chunks of rock in the process. The moment the rocks separated from the mountain, then quickly changed form, shrinking to the size of small reptile scales.

It really is a chameleon? Dallion wondered.

Its anything that would ensure its survival in the present environment, Nil said. No one has seen one. Heck, no one has even been able to see through its illusions.

Dallion was pretty sure the Moons had. If Gleam was still here, maybe she could as well. The thought came with its share of sadness. The familiar had been a friend and companion for a while. Even if she were on the aggressive side, her banter and advice were always appreciated, not to mention her combat skills. The only consolation Dallion had was the knowledge that she was in the realm of the banished somewhere.

I need more time to complete my spell, Palag said as he grabbed Dallion with a new set of air currents.

Do you have anything that cuts through illusions?

No. Not at this level.

Drat! That was a good spell to have. Illusions, as Dallion had seen, had their own way of creating their own limitations. If there was such a thing as specializing in illusion magic, he was definitely going to do it. Illusions created things that didnt exist, changed reality, even made invincible items vincible. It was even possible that it was an illusion that had caused the death and disappearance of the Eighth Moon. After all, Dallion had just witnessed illusion magic stopping the effects of a spark attack.

Dallion kept attacking, sending off point and line attacks one after the other. Even if it were no different than throwing pebbles at a monster, that was enough to cause pain, or at least a distraction.

Scales kept peeling off the mountain, until all of a sudden it shifted again, transforming into the cone of a tornado.

Thats a poor match-up, Dallion thought. Fighting with air against a fury wasnt the most logical of choices. Good thing that the chameleon had only been in the world for a short period of time. Is there a way to capture it? Dallion asked.

Theres usually a way to capture everything, the old echo replied. Though Im not sure youre equipped to do so. While itll be a huge waste, the best solution would be for you to chase it out of the world, and for that youll have to rely on the apprentice.

Didnt you say he was incompetent? Dallion did a vertical line attack at the tornado.

The attack slammed the cone of wind, slicing through a few dozen layers of air currents, then was captured by the raw power of the wind. Point attacks fared no differently, merely bushing the whole cone backwards.

Done! the fury shouted.

Thanks to Dallion engaging the creature, he had managed to complete the spellor rather, the chain of spells. Dozens of circles, each with twenty symbols each, floated around him, attached to one another. With one flick of the wrist, Palag had them assemble, creating a glowing sphere of symbols, which he then launched at the wind cone.

Instinctively, Dallion split into twenty instances, half of which covered his face and upper torso with the armadil shield.

The sphere of magic slammed into the cone. It didn't distort it, nor was it pulled in by the wind. Instead, it stood there, both part of it, yet separate.

The tornado vanished, replaced by a flock of griffins. Screeching, they attempted to charge at Dallion and the fury, but the moment they did, an invisible force pulled them back.

Palag's sphere grew, surrounding the flock like a cage. In an ideal scenario, this would have been enough. Unfortunately, this was far from an ideal scenario. The spell, even if it appeared somewhat complex, didn't seem to have the strength to stop the creature for long. The griffins kept charging at it, creating cracks in the connections between symbols. No individual crash was enough to break the connection outright, but that wasn't going to keep the spell from collapsing for long.

I didn't know you could destroy a spell that way.

That's not a spell, but its result, Nil grumbled. It's a clumsy attempt at an opening. You'll learn about those later. Right now, what's important is

Grab my hand, Dallion told the fury. We'll invade its realm.

What? One didn't need magic skills to hear the terror in the apprentice's voice. We can't invade the realm of a creature.

Watch me. Dallion tossed the harpsisword to his other hand. Lux, give me a shove!

The bladebow thrust through the sky, slowing down just enough to scoop Dallion before pushing him in the direction of the sphere. Before he reached it, the fractures along the magic lines grew to the point, causing the whole spell to shatter. For an instant of the second, the flock of griffins was there, completely free and vulnerable. Then, they were all replaced by a chunk of falling ice. Spell circles formed, launching icicles at Dallion with tremendous speed. However, this was to his advantage. Splitting into instances, he not only managed to evade them, but completed a perfect guard sequence, causing time to slow down. That only made things easier, letting him complete a second sequence, then a third, then more, until time froze altogether.

Got you, Dallion thought. It had been a while since he'd used guard skill bonuses in the real world. The advantages they provided in the air were a lot less than those on ground. Dallion didn't have a means of movement other than Lux and the icicles he was evading. The moment he came into contact with any, though, and the time stop would end.

Do you intend to kill me? a voice asked.

It sounded similar to a blade of grass. In fact, it was exactly like the plants that Dallion had spoken to just before the fight. Only, he knew that it didn't belong to a plant, mostly because there were no

plants in the area. Everything, even the grass, had been part of the chameleons disguise. This area of the wilderness was completely barren and likely always had been.

Depends, Dallion replied. Why are you here?

I dropped out here. I was elsewhere when the mages entered. When I dropped out, they didnt let me back in again.

Is that why you attacked us?

You attacked me first.

Youre lying. When I asked about you, you pretended to be plants.

The chameleon didnt answer. Instead, it shifted again. In the blink of the eye, the chunk of ice was done, replaced by a swarm of bees occupying the exact same space it had. Even the icicles had turned into clusters of insects, all of them motionless, following the rules of the guard skills bonus.

How did you guess it wasnt me?

There arent many insects in the wilderness. You told me that you hadnt seen such for months. Thats not something thats part of this reality.

You have an insect.

The mage whos hired me wants to capture you. Dallion changed the topic. Or kill you. I have no idea how strong you are, but with my help, he could achieve either.

I can just run away.

If you could, you would have done so before we got here. Youre stuck here, and I suspect you like it.

If Im captured what will happen to me?

I dont know. If the capture is painless, I can help you set conditions. Itll be better than the alternative.

You havent captured me yet. Maybe youll fail.

Maybe I will, Dallion said, using his music skills to add doubt in his words. But once I do, others will come after me. The mage is a kid, and I just started learning magic. Real mages will come afterwards, powerful mages. They wont have to negotiate theyll be able to pluck you out of your reality and place you in a chunk of aether crystal. There, youll be a prisoner and even reality shifting wont help you.

The chameleon changed again, this time taking the form of a lightning cloud, launching bolts of lightning.

Where did you come from? Dallion asked, sensing the creatures hesitation.

Elsewhere.

Was that what magic was? One big elsewhere? There was no way to know, not until Dallion reached the necessary level of his magic trait. Until then, it was all guesswork and a lot of bluffing.

What will it be?

You dont have the strength to capture me. Ill run away before the ones after you arrive.

We found you, so will they.

The chameleon shifted into a tree, its roots hanging in the air, eager to bury into the ground. Even while frozen, the chameleon was using an exception of magic to wriggle out of its situation. Quite a clever approach. Given enough time, it might even find a way. That was why Dallion didnt intend to let that happen. Taking a deep breath, he focused on the largest branch of the tree and did a point attack.

Normally, such an attack would hardly cause a scar. However, with time stopped, things were different. The reality chameleon didnt have time to put up any defenses or cast a spell. All that the creature could do was shift form again, and so it did.

For a fraction of a second, Dallion managed to get a glimpse of the beings real form. It was largefour times the size of an elephant, completely smooth, covered in scale-like tiles. Between the tiles, threads of magic glowed in various intensities, almost like lights on a circuit board.

The point attack struck, bringing an end to the time freeze. The chameleons front left leg flew, torn off. The rest of the creature collapsed into the shape of a crystal cube. Dallion followed up with a multi-strike of point attacks, but those just bounced off as the cube fell down to the ground.

Threads of magic emerged from all sides of the object, all flying towards the fury. This time, Palag didnt bother to evade, catching them mid-flight. His fingers moved ten times faster than moments ago, composing spell after spell. With each new circle, a net of magic formed around the chameleon. The creature struggled, attempting to break out, but that proved impossible. The nets kept stacking up until they were the only thing that could be seen. Then, the struggle ended.

Isnt that cute? Nil asked, his words soaked with sarcasm. I hope you get something good out of this, considering its an almost guaranteed promotion.

What do you mean?

The furys mage. He was the one who cast the final series of spells through his apprentice.

How?

Youve experienced what its like to have limiting echoes, right? There are worse types, but also better. Consider them symbionts of a sort. I guarantee the apprentice has an echo of the master, which is why the young idiot was so eager to chase down something he knew so little about. As long as the going gets tough, the echo would just watch. The moment theres a practical chance, though, it would step it and assume willing control of its owners realm, and by extension the owner himself.

Dallion felt a chill down his spine.

I thought that wasnt allowed, he said.

Its not, but magic allows for exceptions, especially if one is willing.

Chapter 665: Symbol Crafting

Returning to the Academy was somewhat awkward. There were questions on both sides, but neither felt fully comfortable asking. Having a mage control an apprentice was almost as interesting as details regarding the mage expedition itself. On the other hand, defeating a reality chameleon wasn't a fear that was supposed to be possible. Yet, Dallion strongly suspected that the mage behind it all had gotten the best of both worlds. It was impossible to tell whether the apprentice had come up with the idea to hire Dallion, or that had come as a suggestion from the echo within him. Either way, the chameleon had been caught through minimal effort on the mages side. Not only that, but he had earned some small favor for dealing with a pack of cutlings before they'd gone out of control. As Nil liked to say, everyone got a little something, only some of the participants got a little less.

My mage is thankful for your help, Palag said when they paused for a second evening in the wilderness. It's always good to have favors.

I don't even know who your mage is. I'd hope so. And my fee?

You'll get two more disks when we get back. It's up to you to decide what to use them for. Personally, I'd suggest going for the levels. You can always get more of them later.

And class?

You'll still go on a lighter schedule. With your level, you can spend most of the time in the library, or your room.

But not outside.

No. You have to be an apprentice for that.

There's always something, Dallion thought. When he had set off to fulfill this request he thought he was getting a pretty good deal. Magic was something money couldn't buy. Now that he saw what was involved, he felt cheated. Two artifacts and a vague favor. If he were allowed free access to the empire, he could achieve that on his own. It wouldn't be difficult to find where the disk artifacts were. With a bit of luck, he could find a few dozen.

Fret not, dear boy, you did well,

Nil said. Think of it as personal experience. *The sooner you learn some lessons, the better. You're already more famous than most who arrive. Have you noticed how so many people have been approaching you for assistance? That only proves you are valued.*

Dallion didn't say a word. While it was nice to be valued, it was even better to be the one telling others that they were valued. Once he got his reward, he planned to do something that went against everyone's advice. It was somewhat of a risk, but at least he knew what the benefits would be, and got them immediately.

Back in the learning hall, Dallion was given two artifacts, just as he had been promised. While it was tempting, he resisted entering the items, consuming their magic instead. The effect allowed him to see twice as many books in the library as before. As expected, the vast majority dealt with

practical advice on how to extract magic from anything seen in nature. One even specified how to extract magic from creatures, although it came with multiple warnings that the process was risky, coming with the danger that one might get his own magic extracted instead. Interestingly enough, the mage duels had originated as a result of that discovery. Once it was found that mages had the ability to consume magic from others, a set of rules were devised to ensure that the process could occur between people without incurring the wrath of the Purple Moon.

Meanwhile, things in class returned to their normal state. Cliques were formed, as well as enmities. Since being a mage was considered an elite club, regardless of other status, open hostilities weren't allowed. Even Phoel and his group had decreased their attempts to physically hurt Dallion, not that it would have worked, and resorted to more sophisticated methods, such as oratory. Those attempts were also laughable, but just in case, Dallion received a warning from the Palag not to resort to magic, or face severe punishment.

By the end of the second week, there wasn't a single person who hadn't passed the leveling up assignment. Moderately pleased with the results, the apprentice started giving out other practical tasks, such as taking magic from a variety of materials. It was a long and tedious series of chores that seemed to have no end. It didn't matter how well someone did, there was always another task.

It was during that period that class champions emerged. Dallion, surprisingly, wasn't the first. That honor went to the black-haired boy, no doubt instructed by a host of echoes within his realm. One interesting observation Dallion noticed was that even after a month, no one seemed to know the boy's name. He was certain to have asked multiple times, but was yet to remember the answer. At one point, he was almost convinced that the boy had to be illegitimate, and had his name erased.

The third champion of the cohort was Cheskaa rather assertive girl that was referred to as a prodigy. Looking at her, there was nothing of particular interest. Cheska was smack in the middle between beautiful and plain, her traits weren't much higher than the class average. She wasn't overly quiet, but not part of any group, either. It was only when Dallion had taken his bladebow to class and sneakily used the kaleidervisto inside to spy on his classmates that he saw why she was so special: unlike everyone else, Cheska didn't have a single echo within her. Everything she had achieved was through pure skill and intuition. Furthermore, based on the sections of the books she was reading, Dallion came to the conclusion that her magic trait was a lot over five, possibly over ten as well.

Cheska's quite strong, isn't she? Dallion whispered during dinner one evening.

Of course, the black-haired replied, elegantly eating his soup. They had agreed not to discuss anything regarding the alliance or the rewards outside items. However, that didn't prevent them from discussing trivial matters in the open. They say she might be a favored of Galatea. Some mages have already approached her with apprenticeship offers.

Dallion could help but feel a hint of envy. If he had gotten an apprenticeship offer, he would have taken it on the spot. He knew that the first offers were always the worst. Mages who had something substantial to offer would always make their offers last, regardless if the novice had accepted someone else's offer or not. All those trying to snatch Cheska early on, were gambling that she wouldn't know how the game was played. Given that she had refused, they were wrong.

What's your offer? Dallion looked at the noble.

For the first time since he'd known him, a smile appeared on the black-haired's face.

Eight, he said calmly.

Dont tell me youre a favored as well.

No, just connected. Four artifacts, three duels. I could have gone for two more, but wheres the hurry?

A chill swept through Dallion, listening to the explanation. It wasnt that the boy was evil as far as perception and music skills could determine he was quite okay for someone in his position. It was the power he wielded that was terrifying. Giving up a level was a pretty big deal, yet several people at the academy had done so willingly: possibly apprentices with little prospects who had sacrificed a bit of their own magic progression to get ahead. And if such practices were normal for children of stature, one could only imagine what noble mages received.

You?

Im a five, Dallion didnt even try to be evasive.

Better reach ten. Itll be difficult passing with less, even for you.

No problem. If children were supposed to reach that level without duels in a few months, hed manage as well.

As another week passed, the class was divided into three groups. Nothing was said openly, but it was obvious to anyone that skill categories were formed. Those who were skilled had Palag criticize their every mistake, those that werent got the majority of his attention, and the extremely skilled they were left to progress at their own pace.

Precisely one month after Dallion had joined the Academy, the first major change took place. He, and everyone else with a magic trait of five or more, was taken to another room. Only eight people were there, although from what Nil shared, others would slowly join in upon meeting the requirements.

I would say that congratulations are in order, the fury began, but the truth is that youre expected to reach rank two in a month. A few of you managed to do so sooner, but chose to remain till the end of the time period. No doubt you have echoes of far more experienced mages giving you better advice than I ever could. However, that doesnt make you experts yet.

The fury drew several circles in the air. A series of scrolls appeared, then slowly floated in front of every student.

So far, youre learned to sense, extract, and consume magic. Now, youll start learning the building blocks of spells. Things are about to get a lot more difficult than before. If in the past you had only magic to worry about, now you must advance your skills as well. He drew a single symbol in the air. It was almost shaped like a letter, glowing a magnificent purple. There are three pillars of spellcraft: magic, he extended one finger, spelling, and combining.

Spelling? Dallion chuckled. Thankfully, the furys habit of blocking all sound while speaking made the action pass unnoticed.

Everything in this world is created based on the power of existence. The Order of the Seven Moons call it spark. Scholars of the past referred to it as ambrosia. Whatever the name, it is the building blocks that create this world and everything in it, including you, me, or even the awakening realms.

Phoil raised his hand.

Yes? the fury paused, allowing the large child to speak.

Does that mean that we can extract magic from anything? Even if it doesn't have magic?

Everything has magic to a certain degree. The difference between magic and spark is that spark can only be extracted by the Moons themselves. However, the reverse is not true. Using the correct symbols, created with the right amount and speed of magic, we can create spark.

Now it was Cheska's turn to raise her hand. The fury nodded her direction.

There are spells that let us destroy objects. How is that different?

You're still creating spells. It doesn't matter that their purpose is to destroy. However, even with them, you cannot extract the spark within them, just destroy what already exists.

Dallion gaped. Things seemed a lot clearer now, but at the same time, the fascination was gone. Although crude, the explanations reminded him of quantum mechanics or at least what he imagined quantum mechanics would be. In less than a minute all the charm and fascination of learning magic had completely evaporated, replaced by the cold logic of science. On the positive side, scholar skills were going to be of a huge advantage.

You've been focusing on pulling magic threads of different speed and strength. Now you'll learn how to manipulate it to create symbols. Also, you'll start learning the various varieties, and before any of you get any bright ideas, there are over one thousand discovered spell symbols. To be passable at spellcraft, you need to be perfectly acquainted with thirty-nine.

Is that true, Nil? Dallion asked.

Quite true, dear boy. But also, very false. New symbols are discovered every few years, however, a large part of them remain unusable in spells.

Are they grouped into categories? Dallion picked up the scroll and unrolled it. There was one single symbol on its circle.

Naturally. That is something that cannot be taught. Part of learning the symbol is also learning what it does.

You're only told about something once you know about it. Dallion sighed. Once again, he was reminded of why he hated school.

Chapter 666: Matter Symbol

The first symbol that Dallion had to learn turned out to be the symbol of matter. Despite saying that symbols had to be learned in order to be understood, Palag hinted that it had to do with object creation.

At first Dallion spent a few seconds doing the same that every other child did, trying to use his magic to draw the symbol on the air. That didn't work, of course. No matter the effort, the magic would move about like a brush constantly connected to Dallion's finger. Then Dallion took the next logical step, venturing into his awakening realm. While trying to clear a magic artifact was a bit too much, awakening realms provided one major advantage over the real world: instruction markers.

The moment Dallion tried repeating the same action he did in class, a purple gauge appeared, along with a series of dots in the air. Looking closer, one could see that the dots formed the general shape of the symbol.

So, that's the trick? Dallion tapped on one of the dots. The moment he did, the symbol disappeared.

Confused, Dallion tried again to achieve the same result. His first thought was to try with a different dot. Given that there were only four dots, there weren't too many options. Three attempts later, though, nothing had changed.

You've got to be kidding me. Dallion closed his eyes. He knew that the solution had to be easy enough for a child to figure out.

Perfectly calm, he inhaled and exhaled. Then he opened his eyes again. Every skill had its quirks, especially the complicated ones. Forging was based on folding, music, on getting the right sound at the precise moment of time. That meant that this skill was based on precision and gauging.

Once again Dallion tapped on the magic marker, this time making sure to release the exact amount of mana the gauge suggested. A line of glowing purple filled the dot like toothpaste, allowing Dallion to draw it to the next. When he dragged on, the symbol disappeared again.

Good intuition, dear boy, Nil said, beaming with pride a few steps away. Usually it takes first timers a while before they catch on.

No worries. Dallion smiled. Just like guitar hero.

As it turned out, spellcraft was nothing more than releasing the correct amount of magic at the right spots so as to form the symbol. Dallion assumed the circle was the easiest, so he quickly proceeded to complete it.

MATTER SYMBOL CREATED

When used in a spell, allows for the creation of any material, provided the magic is of the same speed and intensity as that within the respective material.

Now it made a lot more sense why so much of the lessons were focused on getting learning the speed and intensity of magic within various materials. Just to be certain, Dallion focused on creating the gold. The gauge marker changed, indicating the new speed at which he had to release his magic. Once done, the symbol materialized, taking on the appearance of solid gold.

I guess this beats summoning metal, Dallion thought. Without a doubt, it was going to make forging a lot easier, not to mention cheaper.

The next hour was spent with Dallion making a variety of matter symbols of different materials. More importantly, he also focused on drawing them as fast as possible. With the value of his reaction traits that were supposed to be easy, yet even after doing his best he was barely able to

match Palags speed. It seemed that releasing magic quickly was a talent he lacked. For that to improve, he had to improve his spellcraft skills.

Nil, where does magic come from? Dallion asked, taking a break.

Again with the philosophical questions? The old echo smiled.

If mages can create matter out of magic, wont there be too much of it?

Yes, and no. The world doesnt have an infinite amount of magic. If you transform all magic into matter, there will be a few more mountains, maybe more than a few. But then there will be less magic to stop the decay from spreading. Magic keeps the void in check. Thats one of the reasons there arent all out mage wars. Using too much magic tends to be followed by an increased number of monsters in the wilderness.

And killing those restores the level of magic?

No. Magic comes from other worlds. Nil paused. No, not your world. It comes from places that are elsewhere. Realms that are beyond the realms and such.

The banishment realms, Dallion whispered. He didnt even know what he had done so, but the moment he did, a blob of dread emerged within Nil.

There will be a time for complex theory later, the echo said, turning around. Youve learned to stand, now learn to walk before setting off on a run.

Ill hold you to that. Dallion pretended to focus on his symbol drawing.

A few more hours later, he felt done. Even something as simple as releasing magic had drained him to the point that he took a nap in his realm. When he woke up, he found Gen sitting on a stone, not too far away.

How long have you been there? Dallion asked.

Long enough, the echo replied. There was a time when Dallion had considered himself lucky, defeating the echo in the awakening trial set up for him. Now, the echos level seemed laughably insignificant. Still, he could be said to be one of the realms oldest inhabitants, and the one who continued to maintain it.

What about the rest?

Ariel is off somewhere. He doesnt like staying in one place. And Julys still at the ruins.

That felt like a blow beneath the belt. July had joined Dallions realm the same day as Gleam had. The two had formed a close connection. Now that she was gone, the echo still hadnt gotten over it. Dallion knew that, because he hadnt either; July was just the element within him that didnt bother to keep the sadness bottled up.

Ill talk to him. Dallion stretched, then stood up.

He knows everything youd say. Besides, hes been at it for centuries.

Maybe after a few more, hell be able to let it go.

Will you? Gen crossed his arms. Have you noticed how much lonelier its become here? There was a time when this place was a bunch of rooms linked by a corridor and still it was more cheerful than now.

Time moves slower in the real world. Give me a while.

We both know thats not the issue. Youre still full of regrets. Why do you think Ariels been about? Only he has the strength to deal with things in your realm that are unwanted.

No one had said anything to Dallion about invasions, yet deep down he knew that things werent going well. That was one of the reasons he hadnt been venturing into his realm, especially after his fight with the Star; that was why he was ignoring all the weeds and thorny bushes that appeared in the otherwise tropical paradise.

Youre right. Maybe there isnt any time. Dallion looked up at the sky. Lux.

No sooner had he said it when the firebird emerged a few feet above his head.

Yes, boss?

Take me to a trial door.

Three trials remained in Dallions realm. Two of them were at the sea cliffs on the other side of the island. The third was high within the realms mountain. Dallion didnt particularly care which trial he had to face. He had already made up his mind to complete them all in the next few days. That would forcibly bring his magic trait back to level two, but it was worth the sacrifice. If nothing else, hed pass the next gate, and possibly grant him insight on things that still remained hidden. Also, being proclaimed a noble would allow him to continue the training in the comfort of a home outside the academy. There would be no seals, no special assignments, no small-time alliances. Dallion would finally take the final step from chess piece to player.

You think Im wrong, Harp? Dallion asked.

It doesnt matter what I think, the harpsiswords strings vibrated, forming words. Its your life. If you think thats the right path, Ill be there to make sure you survive.

Is there a reason I shouldnt? Its only a trial.

Im not talking about the trial, but what will follow.

A small fort awaited Dallion high on the mountain range. As the number of trials diminished, their entrances became a lot grander. Placing his hand on the marble double doors, Dallion pushed. The doors slid open, revealing a regal corridor full of gold and marble statues.

You seem to be rising in the world, the armadil shield said.

Only my world.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your destiny.

The blue rectangle appeared, only to be waved away as Dallion flew further down the corridor. Drawing his sword, he then tapped it in his boot, making it vibrate. After a while, a large arch emerged in the distance, leading to a large chamber. After passing through, Dallion found himself in the field of an arena.

This is new. He looked around. The arena was identical to the one in Nerosal, only empty.

This brings back memories, the armadil shield said. Some thought you might win the final.

Not a chance.

Untypically humble, a new voice said.

Before Dallions very eyes, a figure appeared in the arena. It was tall, wearing a black mages robe, and also covered in a shimmering glow.

Alien, Dallion whispered. That was the first mage Dallion had seen, also the first person from Earth, not counting Arthurows. Youre my trial?

I am now. The mage took a step forward. This is the spot you humiliated the Archdukes son.

And the place you lost a member of the imperial family, Dallion countered.

No ones perfect, even me. Welcome to the Academy, by the way. I hear youre doing well for a novice. Its really stupid to trade away your magic levels, especially after everything youve done.

Three levels arent that much. Dallion attempted using his music skills, but no matter how subtly he went about it, the sound tendrils seemed to bounce off the mage. Three levels is all it takes for me to become a noble.

Is that so? In that case, why dont we get started?

Dallion burst into a hundred instances. In half, he charged at his opponent, while the rest did a series of point and line attacks. Entire sections of the arena were sliced and drilled into oblivion, yet not a hair fell from the mages head. He just stood there, with his mocking expression, a sphere of blue energy surrounding him.

Determined to see this through, Dallion switched to one of the instances charging at Alien and split again. Hundreds of spark attacks hit the magic sphere surrounding the mage, yet none passed through. The harpsisword was consistently pushed back, as if by a hurricane.

Had enough? Alien asked. You can rest if you want to. I wont attack. The thing is, I dont have to.

Dallion gritted his teeth. He could tell he was being provoked.

Every trial has a solution, he said, slowly circling his enemy.

Yes, but magic is the exception. It might have worked if you had tried before getting magic, but now its an entirely different game. You can no longer ignore it and unfortunately for you, magic can no longer ignore you either. Why do you think mages dont level up? Did you really believe that it was the loss of magic levels?

Im told its a good deterrent.

Maybe at the start, but there always comes a time when a mage decided they could beat fate and use their spellcraft to level up. As you said, a few levels aren't that much. The real blocker are the trials themselves. You've already seen what magic could do and how powerless you are against it. Now in your trials, you'll have to fight against what you imagine mages could do. The mage took a step forward. It's rather unfortunate that you're also so familiar with the effect of illusions. If not, maybe your spark attacks might have worked.

There still has to be a way. There's always a way.

Go ahead. Try finding it. The mage's fingers danced in the air, drawing three dozen symbols in less than a second. Moments later, the entire arena was flooded by lightning from above.

Chapter 667: Magic Fears

Dallion and the mage ripped the air, clashing like two comets of polar opposed magnetic ore. Each side had its own method of fighting, resulting in the utter destruction of the arena around them. Dallion would use his instances and familiars to crack the Aliens perfect defense, while the mage would cast multiple spells with large ranging effects. The issue was that while Dallion was getting more and more tired, his opponent was as energetic as he had been at the start of the fight.

Nox! Dallion shouted. A pack of cublings charged at the mage, shredding the protective sphere surrounding him. No sooner had they done so than three more formed, effectively negating all progress.

Suddenly a torrent of wind exploded from the mage, pushing the Noxes, as well as all of Dallion's instances fifty feet back.

Lux, your turn! Dallion summoned ingots of metal, leaving Nox to propel them at the target.

The approach had helped defeat Vermillion's serpent made out of a chain of islands and still, it proved useless against a mage. The ingots simply bounced off, dealing devastation to what was left of the surrounding arena.

Seeing it was no use, Dallion stopped.

Why? he whispered.

Because you don't think you're strong enough, his opponent replied.

I've defeated mages before.

You were never alone. Also, I'm not a simple mage. I'm the epitome of magic, the pinnacle as seen through your imagination. If you were defeated by a platypus, there's no way your subconscious would rationalize winning against me. Don't feel bad. It's the same for all mages. Every single one of them goes through the same. No matter how strong you are, your understanding of the aspects you don't know is always greater.

Dallion's first thought was that he should have waited until he could actually compose spells before taking on the challenge. With a bit of luck, and a lot of training, it might prove to be enough. Not now, though.

All of Dallion's instances faded, leaving a single one. One by one, he unsummoned his weapons, then the armadillo shield.

Well, at least you know your limitations, Alien said. One bit of advice. There are no do overs in the Academy. If you start a conflict there, make sure you can win.

Good advice. Dallion looked around. The stands of the arena had been reduced to rubble. Even the entrance leading in had collapsed, leaving him metaphorically trapped. As much as he disliked it, he was going to say the dreaded words. I surrender.

You failed to defeat your fears!

You wont be able to shape your destiny for another 24:00 hours.

The rectangle emerged as Dallion was transported back to the mountain cliff.

Twenty-four hours. At this rate, it might as well be twenty-four months. After spending a few more seconds staring at the marble doors, Dallion then went back to the real world. Nothing had changed around him. He was back to being a child, in an auditorium with others like him, trying to figure out how to create a magic symbol. If Dallion was half his age, hed probably be ecstatic at being the first; however, after the crushing disappointment during his trial, he could only sigh as he moved his finger through the air, releasing magic as he did.

Well done, Dal. The fury instructor went up to him. A perfect example of a magic symbol.

Thanks. Dallion forced a smile, but his heart wasnt in it.

Since you mastered the principle, youre the first to get your very own practice booklet. The fury drew a series of symbols in the air. One of them was the matter symbol. There are twenty inside. I know youre tempted to learn them all in one go, but try to go slow and steady. Its not only about creating the symbols but also learning what they represent. There wont be any guide book when you get to casting spells.

Yes, sir, Dallion mumbled, and opened the book to the first page.

The symbol there resembled the figure eight. Learning it was going to be just as easy as learning the one for matter. Yet Dallion didnt return to his awakening realm. Instead, he waved his finger about, pretending to try and create the symbol. Come lunchtime, he requested that he spend the rest of the day in the library. Being one of the class champions, he was allowed that caprice. Sadly, that didnt help much.

It had been a while since Dallion had experienced such difficulties progressing. Not that it was the first time hitting a wall. In his mind, he believed that after defeating the Star there was nothing capable of presenting a challenge. In effect, that wasnt true. He had defeated a Star. There was no telling how soon another would emerge.

Youre taking this harder than you should, Nil said. Failing the trial is a good thing. At least now you have no illusions that youll become a noble anytime soon.

Or ever, Dallion whispered.

Dont be so sure. While the challenge is considerable, if no mages ever level up, how would they know that you lose a magic level by doing so?

A sudden glint of hope sparked in Dallions eyes. He should have considered that.

I suggest you take a break for today. Dont try to learn anything more, just get back to your room and get some rest. Let magic take its course.

The advice was rather good, which was why Dallion only ignored half of it. He indeed returned to his room, yet instead of resting, he got back to doing what he was best at: practice and experiment. Rather than focus on learning new symbols, though, he chose to focus on what he had already learned.

Taking a button from his hunters outfit, Dallion tried drawing the circular symbol on it. It took several dozen attempts to get it right, but in the end, he managed to neatly draw a small version of the circle on the buttons surface. The moment he did, the button turned gold.

ENCHANTER

(+2 Body)

Youve acquired the understanding and finesse to use symbols to enchant items. Keep in mind that enchantments lie halfway between reality and illusion.

A purple rectangle appeared before quickly fading away. Entering the realm of the button, Dallion saw exactly what the explanation meant. On the inside, the button remained just that a wooden button. The matter symbol glowing with the strength and speed of gold was clearly visible on a wall, modifying the physical aspect of the item.

Thinking about it, enchantments seemed to be nothing more than stable illusions: they turned something into something it was not. For the moment Dallion only knew how to create certain materials, but with enough practice he could potentially make items invisible, electric, or even indestructible.

The rest of the day was spent changing the material of everything in Dallions room. At one point, he turned everything into pure gold, to Rubys dismay, before returning it to normal.

Another discovery he made was that, by slicing through the threads of magic, one had the ability to destroy the rune. Typically, the connections within the symbol itself were too strong to be torn using standard means, but the Nox dagger proved more than capable of achieving that. Funnily enough, that also gave Dallion the achievement of disenchanter, along with two points on his mind trait.

The following day, the symbol learning continued. Dallion learned the symbol for shape, temperature, attachment, and several more. Each new symbol allowed him to achieve different feats, upon attaching it to an object, and with each successful enchantment, Dallions spellcraft skill increased. Unlike most of Dallions other skills, the process was exceedingly easy. In a matter of days, he had already gotten to thirty-seven. The same couldnt be said for his magic trait that remained the same regardless of what he did.

Look what I did! Phoel boasted during lunch.

Over a dozen children had gathered, looking at him expectantly. Dallion wasnt among the group. Like the black-haired, and Cheska, he remained at the champions table finishing his food.

Flying quills! Phoil said triumphantly, as several feathers rose up in the air. It was obvious that the echoes within him had suggested he learn one of the symbols at the back of the book.

Show off, Cheska said beneath his breath. Similar to Dallion, she had managed to achieve a lot more. Unlike Phoil, though, she had only shown it to a select few; namely the known members of the alliance and the instructor. Its flashy, Ill give him that, but seriously

Ignore him. Dallion drew a heat symbol on the side of his bowl, warming up the lukewarm soup he had been given. People will get tired.

I doubt it, Cheska snorted. Knowing him, if hes out of ideas, hell announce hes learned everything there is.

Right.

How many have you learned?

Eight. Going on nine.

Though youd be more with your traits. A distinct sense of superiority emanated from the girl. As any prodigy, she excelled at showing others she was better, especially those who were of the same caliber.

The black-haired, in contrast, remained perfectly calm, as if everything going on was beneath him. Despite being ten, he was the alpha predator of the cohorta very cold, calculating, and shiny predator.

What about you? Dallion probed.

The noble gave him a single cold look, then went back to reading his book.

Are you still at five? he asked.

For the moment. You said there was time.

Youre taking a big risk. The tone of the boy had changed. This was no longer a child talking. Dallion had enough experience with nobles to know that he was repeating the words of someone with authority. In all likelihood an Archduke was issuing the warning, and it had to be heeded. Learn the primary symbols, then focus on your magic.

Ill do that.

A feather zipped by, inches from Dallions face, hitting the table.

Oops, sorry about that, Phoil said with the sincerity of a feasting crocodile. Still getting a hang on my magic.

Dont worry about it. Dallion picked up the feather with his left hand, then drew a symbol on it. The feather burst into flames. Magic is a tricky thing, but youll get there.

Silence filled the dining room. Quickly, everyone moved away, returning to their meals or leaving the room altogether. A few minutes later, Dallion left his soup unfinished and left as well. The time of Academy innocence had ended. Deep down, he had feared this would happen. Hed only thought that hed have a bit more time.

Nil, how important is this amethyst? Dallion asked as he made his way along the corridors of the Learning Hall.

Like all Moonstones, extremely and not at all, the echo replied. It is said that they are a fragment of the Moons themselves both physically and metaphorically. Its said that the archbishop of the Order has oneAstrezas. Even he doesnt do anything with it, though.

Thats not what the Archdukes son said.

I was there, dear boy. Annoyance crept into Nils tone. Yes, in theory, as a physical representation of the Moon, the Moostones should share the same properties. I wont lie that mages havent used them for components in their experiments, but thats it. The Purple Moon doesnt like it if someone draws magic out of his stone, so there arent many who bother getting it. Well, except for vanity purposes.

Why is the Archduke so eager to get it?

That is not for us to know.

The more Nil became evasive, the more it became clear that only a conversation with the originalcaptain Adzorg. Before that, though, Dallion intended to take advantage of the favor he was owed, or even better. If there was one thing the general had taught him, it was that every deal was prone to renegotiation.

Chapter 668: The Pass Seal

No! Absolutely not! Palag said.

The fury barely raised his tone, but from the view of a ten-year-old it was the same as if he were shouting. Despite himself, Dallion suppressed the urge to get into a fight.

Why not? You told me that I was owed a favor. He paused for a while. Sir.

Mages cant just boost the magic of others. If it were that simple, what would be the reason for having novices?

Dallion felt like biting his tongue. It was no secret how the nobles got their levels. One in Dallions class had openly admitted it, and yet the pretense remained. Sadly, arguing about it went nowhere.

Cant I get another artifact, then?, Dallion persisted. You told me that those were common.

Aetherizers wont boost your over five. And you were already given three.

Then tell me where theyre found and Ill go get some myself.

Had Dallion been in his normal form, this might have passed as a valid argument, one could even call it a negotiation. Said in the squeaky voice of a child it sounded more like he was having a tantrum. Even Dallion himself felt like sending him to his room.

Ask for a pass seal, Nil suggested.

How will that help?

Trust me on this. Just ask for one.

What about a pass seal? Dallion asked. Can I get that, at least?

The fury froze. For a fraction of a second, every muscle in his body stopped moving, as if hed been asked to share his deepest, darkest secret.

Who told you about that? the instructor asked.

Do I have to say?

Palag said nothing. His features suddenly hardened, giving an air of authority. If Dallion had to guess, the mage had taken control of his apprentice through the symbiote echo right now.

Getting the pass will use up your favor, the fury said. Are you sure you understand that?

I think itll be worth it, sir. That was highly arguable. Dallion wasnt even fully sure what he was asking. His faith was that Nil wouldnt let him down. So far, the echo had helped him quite a number of times, not to mention his advice was, for the most part, valid. The faster I can improve, the more Ill be able to learn.

Speed is the quickest path to failure. Youll have your pass. The furys expression softened, marking the end of the echos influence. It was a somewhat disturbing notion, though not as disturbing as the fact that Dallion had become used to it.

Sir?

Give me your hand. The fury sighed.

The seal was a small but intricate combination of symbols, placed on top of Dallions novice seal. All attempts to memorize the symbols proved unsuccessful. The vast majority of the symbols were unfamiliar, and those that were, were applied too fast for Dallion to make out the final details.

There you go. The fury let go of Dallions hand. Youre able to freely go about the Academy, though not outside.

Thanks. Dallion looked at his hand. The overall seal had become a lot more intricate than before.

Now, get lost.

Dallion didnt need to be told twice, rushing out of the apprentices room as fast as a thunder leopard. Being allowed freedom of movement filled him with a sense of achievement, but he still was unsure how that was going to help him with his immediate problem.

Get out of the building, Nil said. Ill tell you where to go from there.

Are we going to steal something?

Yes, though in a good way. First, Ill need you to go and get a new library.

Stepping out of the Learning Hall caused a bit of a scene. While changing shape meant nothing within the walls of the building, doing so on the outside was bound to attract attention. Everyone in the vicinity stared at Dallion. Waves of curiosity filled the entire area, though they were soon replaced by disinterest and disappointment.

Whats up with them? Dallion wondered.

They thought you were some high-level mage showing off some new spell, Nil explained. When they saw you werent, they lost interest.

Fun. So where do we go?

The light in the area was shining brighter than he remembered. The number of people, on the other hand, was a lot less than when he had first arrived. Directed by Nil, Dallion made his way along some of the smaller streets to a simple two-story building. The magic glowing above the entrance indicated that this was a second-hand shop. Looking through the window, it seemed rather specious, though completely deprived of people.

I should have brought Ruby along, Dallion thought as he opened the door and stepped in.

The inside of the store was at least a dozen times larger than the outside. Racks of clothes and artifacts filled the area, each with their prices written in glowing letters. Whoever owned the place had quite a good understanding of basic marketing, surrounding expensive items with cheap ones. As another good touch, the more expensive the item, the brighter its price glowered.

What you want? A dwarf stepped up to Dallion. From what he could tell, she was in her late teens and utterly unhappy with being here. Interestingly enough, Dallion could only detect the faintest amount of magic within her.

Looking for something useful, he replied with a smile, adding some joy to his words.

Can you afford anything? Were not a charity here. Clearly, even music skills had their limits.

I dont know. Is there anything worth buying?

Why, you

Thank you for welcoming the customer, Caire, a stern voice said. Moments later, a bulky dwarf came from behind one of the racks. Unlike the younger one, magic filled his entire body, indicating that if not a mage, he was at least a high-ranking apprentice. Ill take it from ere.

The young dwarf rolled her eyes, then went off, vanishing in the vastness of the shop.

My apologies. Shes a good child, just at an age in which shes annoyed at life. Anyway, I was told to expect you. Please, come follow me. The dwarf rushed off through the labyrinth of racks and shelves.

Told to expect me? Dallion followed. By who.

Our common friend is best left unnamed. Fortunes can rise and fall quickly, and its always a good idea to remain close with those on top.

Dont I know it?

The dwarf led Dallion to a small display case with various rings. All of them appeared simplemere bands of silver without any decorations. For some reason, they reminded Dallion of the ring Adzorg had given him.

Those were made by him, werent they? he asked.

All the valuable ones were taken by the Archmage, but some of the lesser trinkets found their way ere. The dwarf opened the case and took a ring. This is for you.

For free?

No. The dwarf laughed. Ill open a tab. Our friend said youre good for it, so Ill trust that youll settle your debts when you can.

Sounds fair. Whats the local currency? Gold? Platinum?

Gold can do, but I prefer aethercubes.

Learning that gold was accepted as a currency was remarkably refreshing. For all their powers, it seemed that leveling up items wasnt something that mages were particularly adept at, or even willing to do.

With a nod, Dallion took the ring and slid it onto his index finger. Venturing into its realm, he found that it was another library. The major difference was that all the scrolls and tomes were focused on magic and history.

I would suggest that you link it to your realm, Nil said. Would be easier for everyone.

Shouldnt I check to make sure there isnt anything lurking about?

Youve grown quite a bit. Yes, by all means, do that, dear boy.

Dallion could feel the sense of pride emanating from Nil throughout his realm, and still, for some reason, he felt as if hed just been tricked.

With the linking of the new ring, a second library emerged in Dallions domain. Thousands of new scrolls and tomes were added, including quite a few detailing part of the Academys history. It was at that point that Dallion understood the need for the seal pass.

It turned out that in addition to consuming magic from artifacts and living entities, mages could also increase their level by absorbing concentrations of magic called vortexes. The origin of the vortexes was still strongly debated among mage scholars, but there were little doubts regarding their nature: they appeared at random and had enough energy to create the equivalent of realms of their own. Only accessible by mages, they were something between an item realm and an awakening trial. If a mage were to defeat the guardian of the realm, the magic of the deal would be absorbed by the mage, increasing his magic trait. Matters were different when dealing with higher-level vortexes, but that was something Dallion didnt have to worry about. For now, his only goal was to find the weakest of vortexes and increase his level. As to where one could find such, it appeared that vortexes were also connected to the amount of magic present in the real world. Places with high magic concentrations tended to attract vortexes on a regular basis, and one of the places with the highest concentrations of magic in the real world was nowhere else, but the Academy itself. All that Dallion had to do was to find these locations before any other mage and absorb them.

Its all quite simple, Nil said, now free to talk about the matter freely since Dallion had become aware of the information. There are hundreds of minor vortexes that appear here every month. The

obvious ones are dealt with instantly, but those that are hidden in some corners of the area are left lingering for months.

Just like that? Dallion found it hard to believe. No one wants to increase their level?

The small ones aren't worth it. Beyond a certain level, they stop having any effect. Maybe some low-level apprentice might go searching, but even they won't bother.

How do I find them?

That's a bit trickier. Normally you'll learn a spell to locate them, but since you can't craft spells yet, you'll have to rely on artifacts.

You're aware that I'm effectively broke. It'll be a while since I can earn money as a hunter and

You already have the artifact, Nil interrupted. All you need is your otherworlder sight and a kaleidervisto.

How would that work?

All this time and you still haven't learned how to read properly, Nil sighed. Vortexes aren't from this world. You'll be able to see them easily.

Just like anyone else. Dallion frowned. With the amount of magic they have, they'll shine like a beacon in the night.

Only those that are linked to the real world.

Suddenly Dallion was at a lack of words. He was still thinking in terms of the physical world, forgetting that magic didn't apply by standard rules. Magic vortexes could just as easily connect to realms as they did to the real world. If they connected to the realm of an area of item, they were likely to remain invisible, just like an echo within that realm would be. That was where the kaleidervisto came in, granting him the ability to see within the realm without entering it. As for the otherworldly shimmer, that was the way of distinguishing between a natural magic thread and a vortex.

You're sure there's no rule against this? Dallion asked.

There's nothing written down. Clearing vortexes has always followed the principle finders-keepers. The bigger ones require expeditions of multiple people, but that's a whole other ball of wax. You already have everything it takes to increase your magic trait. All you need to do is get to it.

Why do I have the feeling it won't be as easy as you make it out to be?

Was hunting easy? You still managed, though. It'll be the same here, only different very different.

Chapter 669: Vortex Awakening

Walking around the surrounding section of the Academy ended up being a lot more interesting than expected. Dallion almost forgot his immediate problems and concerns, as if he'd taken a brief vacation. The people, although always hurrying for somewhere, didn't talk about politics, the internal empire conflicts, or even the war. It was as if a bubble of calm had been created, keeping the rest of the world at bay. However, even so, Dallion could escape the notion of being constantly watched. The White Eye faction of mages were doing their job subtly, and not so subtly. And even if

they werent having a novice walk about with a bowblade was bound to attract some attention. At times like these, Dallion wished he was wearing his disfocus ring.

Youre doing fine, Nil encouraged Dallion. Its normal to be watched. No different from what guardians are doing every day.

Guardians dont usually want to kill me, Dallion whispered.

Going past the cluster of buildings around the Learning Hall, Dallion continued through the fields. From what Nil had assured him, most of the neglected vortexes were in isolated, rarely visited parts of the Academy, namely the spot in which the sewers connected to one of the rivers of the area. That didnt feel Dallion with enthusiasm, even if he couldnt deny the echos logic.

After about half an hour of walking, he stopped and looked around with his magic layer vision. The surroundings had a lot less magic compared to the place hed come from. Even so, there was enough for him to pull out a bit from the ground. Sensing that he was still being watched, Dallion did just that.

Bending down, he reached into the soil with his magic, then gently pulled out a small thread. The result was a small ball no larger than the nail of his little finger. Dallion had extracted more during class. Still, he followed up with the act by placing it in one of the depleted disk artifacts he was carrying. That seemed to appease the White Eye, for Dallion managed to catch a glimpse of a mage in the sky flying away.

Do you think there are any more of them? Dallion asked.

Definitely. Not that it matters. As long as theyve established youre extracting magic, theyll leave you alone.

Even when I get to the sewer connection?

Novices are expected to be stupid, dear boy. As long as you dont make it obvious what youre doing, theyll leave you alone.

The river in question had the appearance of a flowery brook full of crystal clean water. However, looking closer, Dallion was able to see the numerous symbols glowing from it, hiding its true nature. It didnt take long for him to find the entrance to the sewer itself masked as a mound of earth. Once inside, reality instantly changed. Indescribable stench hit Dallion like a hammer, bringing tears to his eyes. Now he understood why mages werent too willing to come here in search of magic vortexes.

Fighting his urge to vomit, Dallion gritted his teeth and went further on. The first thing hed do back in class was to learn how to construct a smell rune to save himself from future torture.

Nox, shed some light, he thought, dreading the prospect of having to open his mouth.

The bladebow moved off his back, surrounded by blue light. Grabbing it with his left hand, Dallion looked through the kaleidervisto scope, searching for any anomalies. If it were up to him, hed use it to fly a foot in the air instead of walking through sewer sludge. For that, though, hed have to wait; flight was a spell, not a symbol.

The minutes felt like hours. Each time Dallion spotted even a minute difference in the areas magic, he rushed in the hope hed found his goal. The first three times, it turned out to be nothing. The fourth one, he found what he was searching for. The vortex had, thankfully, linked itself to the realm of a ceiling tile of the sewer tunnel. Reaching it was going to be slightly tricky, but Dallion was so thankful he wouldnt have to reach into the sewage that he didnt care. Holding his breath, he jumped up, hitting the tile with his fist.

ITEM AWAKENING

A green rectangle appeared.

You are in a small stone room.

Defeat the guardian to change the TILES destiny.

That was all nice and well, but it wasnt the reason Dallion was here. Instead, he split into four instances and looked around. At first there was no sign of magic whatsoever, causing Dallion to dread the prospect that hed gotten the wrong tile. Not too long after, he spotted it: a small purple oval, no larger than a coin, swirling in a corner of the room.

Thats it? Dallion stepped closer.

As I said, those small vortexes arent particularly valued. Its the massive ones that get all the attention. Consider these like copper coinsyou might get them if you come across them, but youll never deliberately go searching for them.

Only someone whod never had trouble with money could come up with such an example. Dallion still remembered the time back in his village, when a silver coin was viewed as a treasure. Then again, he was not n Dherma anymore. Summoning his harpsisword, he reached out and touched the vortex.

VORTEX AWAKENING

You are in a level 1 VORTEX.

Defeat the guardian to absorb the VORTEX.

At least the explanation is direct, Dallion said.

Nothing about him had changedhis was still holding his harpsisword, and after a quick text, it turned out he could summon other items as well. Out of habit, he summoned the armadil shield, although Onda kept insisting that he had to be there as well. The only one that Dallion made sure not to summon, either in item or familiar form, was Nox. The crackling had made it clear that magic hurt him, and the vortex was nothing less than a realm of magic.

You okay here, Lux? Dallion asked.

No problem, boss! The firebird chirped, surrounding Dallion with its flames.

If things get too tough for you, go back without asking, okay? I dont want you to get hurt.

It took several seconds for Dallion to adjust to his surroundings. Not only was everything purple, but the walls, floor, and ceiling were in constant flux, shifting as if Dallion were inside a rubix cube. More alarming than that, the shape and size of the room also changed with each rotation.

A maze? Dallion asked.

Not precisely, Nil replied. Rather, your old self might have considered it a maze. Now that you have gained the magic trait, its anything but. The only advice I can give you is to remember everything youve been taught and

I must follow the thread leading me to where I need to go, Dallion interrupted. All the threads are signs explaining the changes that will come and those that have been. As long as I follow the correct signs, Ill get to where I need to be.

Silence followed. Dallion could feel the astonishment coming from Nil, pulsing like an orb of light in his realm.

Thats what Eleria told me back in Conopa, Dallion explained. I can see the treads and the symbols, though I have no idea whats written there.

Oh Well, yes. Itll be a while before you learn that, but still, well done.

Not being able to read the instructions turned out not to be a big deal. All that Dallion needed to do was to match the shapes of things going on in his surroundings, and he was soon able to navigate the room remarkably well. There was one basic principle: the utter lack of pattern. If most guardians, and even people, so far behaved according to certain patterns, pure magic was based on information. At every moment Dallion was told what would happen, even if the timing and sequence were completely at random. Thinking about it, that could have been the reason he had failed so miserably against the platypus guardian. Dallion was still not thinking like a mage, requiring overwhelming force to solve an elegant puzzle. Hopefully, the vortex guardian wouldnt be as challenging.

For over five minutes, it looked like Dallion was walking in circles. In truth, he was following the invisible path of the room, turning as it did, regardless of the physical representation of the space.

Just exceptions and illusions, Dallion told himself. Thats what magic is.

How strong are vertex guardians? he asked, the harpsisword always by his side.

It depends. Its not so much a matter of strength as it is of behavior. Some youll be able to defeat with a simple spark attack, others might be annoying as the aetherizer guardian. The stronger ones cant be defeated without magic.

That was the crux of it. Things with magic could only interact with other things with magic. Spells were a sort of bridge that connected both. Looking at it, void skills were probably no different.

After another five minutes of walking, the thread suddenly changed direction, moving up a wall. Since Lux granted Dallion the ability to fly, that was no issue. The moment he went up, though, the entire room turned, transforming the wall into the floor.

VORTEX GUARDIAN AETHERVORE

Species: VOXLING

Class: MAGIC

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY 0**
- **MIND 20**
- **PERCEPTION 20**
- **REACTION 40**
- **MAGIC 40**

Skills:

- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **FLASH (Species Unique)**
- **MAGIC DRAIN (Species Unique)**

Weakness: CORE

A purple rectangle emerged. The moment it faded away, the guardian became visible behind. The creature looked like a cross between an eel and an axolotl, though significantly larger. It was interesting that it had no attack or guard skills, but only spellcraft and a few species unique.

Suspecting that magic was the only thing maintaining it, Dallion split into a dozen instances and charged at it, tapping the harpsisword against his boot.

Instantly, symbols appeared on all walls of the room. A barrier of magic separated the room in two, preventing Dallion from reaching his target.

Unwilling to lose his momentum, Dallion infused his weapon with spark and did a line attack. The barrier shattered, though no sooner had it done so, a new set of symbols emerged, teleporting the guardian safely out of reach.

So, thats how youll play. Dallion spun around, continuing with another line attack.

The line of destruction hit the walls, burning into them like a hot wire through butter. Yet once again, the creature evaded the lethal blow, moving away like a purple flash of lightning. A new set of symbols appeared, this time sending lightning bolts straight at Dallion.

Instinctively, Dallion split into fifty instances. The lightning bolts completely ignored the effects, flying towards Dallion in each instance.

Careful! Nil shouted.

Without command, the armadil shield expanded, forming a metal sphere around Dallion. A series of zaps followed, as the lightning bolts scorched its surface.

Lux, cover the shield from the inside! Dallion ordered.

Im fine, the dryad shield guardian said. Electricity doesnt deal that much damage.

Dallion could tell he was lying.

Open up when the spells ended. Ill try something new.

I was afraid you might say that.

Just as the sphere fell to the floor with a large thump, the shield then contracted, returning to its normal size on Dallions arm. Symbols were already covering the walls, ready to cast the next spell. At this point, of all the things Dallion could do, he summoned a dryad scroll.

Huh? If the armadil shield had the ability to blink, he would have.

Time to fight knowledge with knowledge, Dallion said, grabbing hold of the wooden cylinder.

I applaud the effort, dear boy, but theres little that scholar skills could do against magic. A sliver of concern made its way into Nils voice.

Im just following the advice you gave me. Dallion focused on the vortex guardian. Spark and scholar skills.

Chapter 670: Lost Favor

Spark infused quills filled the air like a swarm of bees. The aethervore teleported from spot to spot, faster than the quills could reach them. However, its ability to cast spells was significantly reduced. Dallion was fully aware that it wouldnt be easy to defeat the guardian with scholar skills alone. His main goal was to aim at the magic symbols on the walls; those targets were a lot easier to hit and, thanks to the spark, be destroyed. With each destroyed symbol, two new would emerge, attempting to cast a new spell. It was almost like fighting the equivalent of a hydra made of magic.

Dallion kept splitting into instances, using athletics to run along walls and floor as he chased after the constantly shifting guardian. Sadly, each time the blade of the harpsisword would get anywhere close, the creature would vanish, like it avoided the quills.

Changing his grip, Dallion played a few chords. The sound matched the aethervore, establishing a connection just long enough for Dallion to instill caution and fear within it. The combination wasnt one hed usually go for, but it had the desired effect. With each next flash, the guardian became slightly slower, hesitating as to its next move. An ordinary person wouldnt have noticed the difference, but Dallion saw his attacks getting closer to the target.

Spells stopped being cast, as a stalemate was achieved between the quills and symbols. The two skills had matched each other perfectly, providing Dallion with the advantage.

Got you. Dallion switched his grip of the haprsisword and did a new series of line attacks. Scars covered the walls.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

A line appeared on the guardians body, slicing it in two.

AETHERVORE has been defeated.

The vortex realm exploded, turning into strands of magic. Each and every one of them twirled around Dallion like a hurricane of yarn. The sensation was indescribable. Dallion could feel the

magic pulsing in the air, smelling like fresh ozone. Was this what defeating a vortex creature felt like?

Go ahead and get the magic, dear boy, Nil said. You earned it.

Dallion couldn't help but smile. With magic, even obtaining levels required work. Extending his magic through his fingers, he reached out and grabbed a strand. The moment it made contact, the fragment of magic was sucked into Dallion, filling his arm with warmth as it did. After the strand was absorbed, another was sucked in, and another. In a matter of seconds, the whole vortex had made its way into Dallion, becoming part of his magic.

You have assimilated the VORTEX, increasing your magic trait to 6.

So that's how it happens. Dallion looked at his hand. There were no marks of any other traces that he had consumed the vortex. Not even his magic glow had increased. Regardless, Dallion could feel the change, like a slight fever burning on the inside.

The plain gray walls had returned along with the blue rectangle, reminding him he was back in the realm of the tile.

VORTEX EATER

(+2 Mind)

Congratulations on absorbing your first vortex. You never know, though. Next time it might be harder.

Getting achievements was always welcome. Compared to normal awakened, mages had it quite easy. Still, this was just a means of compensating for the inability to level up.

Suddenly, the blue rectangle tilted.

Nil, Dallion said. Has this happened before?

As he spoke, something hit him in the face it was the floor. Everything started spinning. Dallion closed his eyes, but that only made things worse. He felt as if he were snatched by a hurricane and lifted somewhere high above the ground. Then, just as quickly as it had started, everything froze still. Cautiously, Dallion cracked an eye open.

A stone meadow was around him. The grass, the flowers, even the trees were made entirely out of stone, even if they felt surprisingly soft.

Never a dull moment with you, a familiar voice said.

Looking in the direction of the voice, Dallion saw a dryad dressed entirely in green traveling clothes.

Felygn, Dallion whispered. What happened?

You fainted, the Green Moon said, moving closer. Patches of grass emerged where he stepped, bringing color to the grayness. Gives us a chance to talk.

Reluctantly, Dallion stood up.

I thought I was done after I defeated the Star.

A Star, the Moon corrected. And what made you think that would be all? Theres more in the world than the Star alone? All youve done is to earn the world a brief reprieve. Events are still unfolding.

What must I do this time?

Must? The Moon shook his head. You never had to do anything. It was all a matter of choice. You didnt have to ask for my boons. You didnt have to go south and free Dark. You still did, though, for which Im thankful.

No matter how it was presented, the choice wasnt a choice. True, if Dallions ambitions hadnt been so great he wouldnt have gotten into a situation in which hed need favors from the Green Moon in order to survive.

Reaching into the air, Dallion tried to summon his harpsisword. Nothing happened.

Im in a dream, after all, he thought.

Releasing Aether was the right choice. Felygn patted Dallion on the shoulder. I know youre not convinced, but its better than the alternative.

For me, at least.

For everyone, even for the Star, though in a way you cant understand.

Is that why youre here? To tell me that?

As a matter of fact, yes.

Yeah, right. Dallion thought. The Moons only appeared when they wanted something. The issue was that for the life of him, Dallion wasnt able to figure out what. It had to be related with the Academy, otherwise

Im really just here to talk, the Moon interrupted. It happens from time to time. Maybe in the past Ive used these visits as a pretext to nudge you in the right direction, but youre beyond that now. Think of it as a visit from an old friend come to give you some advice.

Advice from a Moon always comes at a price.

The rest are upset with you. Astreza is upset.

The Moon of Awakening? Why would he be upset? Dallion wondered.

It wasnt like Dallion had fought the Star for the fun of it. Or maybe it was the destruction of the Orders temple that had angered the Blue Moon? Usually, it wasnt difficult to tell, but this time, Dallion was at a complete loss.

That will make your progress quite more challenging, so try not to bite more than you could chew.

I dont understand

Youre cursed, Dallion. You have been for some time.

The shock of the statement made Dallion take a step back. This wasnt something he expected; not that he might get punished by the Moons, but that no one had bothered telling him until now.

Didn't you notice that you're level capped at level eighty?

But that's normal.

Not for humans, especially otherworlders. For you, every second gate is supposed to block your progress, yet you've been unable to boost any skill over eighty. Why do you think that's so?

The Moon was right. Going by the standard logic, Dallion was supposed to be able to boost his skills till a hundred and sixty. Awakening gates were divided into minor and major. Major ones blocked skill boosting until passed. Since the second awakening gate was considered major, the fourth and sixth were supposed to be such as well. At present Dallion was three levels from the fifth gate a minor gate which wasn't supposed to limit his skills, and yet something had.

Where did I mess up?

As usual, you're asking the wrong question. The proper question is whether there's something you can do to earn back your favor.

There it was again the not-so-subtle hook. A voice in the back of Dallion's mind whispered that he would be better off ignoring the entire conversation and just continue with his life. He had magic to focus on, so as to earn his way to get out of the Academy as quickly as possible. Euryale was still out there, and he had absolutely no idea what was going on with her.

The gorgon is well, The Moon said, reading Dallion's thoughts. So are most of your friends. However, there's no guarantee they'll remain alright for long.

Is this a warning?

No. It's a fact of life. You think that just because there's no Star right now, everything's perfect? There are always forces at play and power vacuums are quickly filled up by something else.

Just tell me what I must do! Dallion raised his voice. He was getting tired of all the riddles.

That's not something I can do, even if you are my favored. The dryad suddenly disappeared, replaced by a giant green Moon in the sky above. Astreza enjoys strife and achievement. Find a way to impress him and he'll tell you what to do. Or don't and enjoy the chaos around you. As usual, you have the power to choose.

That's not a choice! Dallion jumped to his feet.

No need to shout, dear boy, Nil said in an annoyed voice. It's not uncommon to faint after an absorption. Usually, it takes a few times to get used to it.

Huh? Dallion blinked.

He was back in the realm of the tile. His conversation with the Moon had ended abruptly, as always, leaving him with questions and an uneasy feeling. The only practical information he'd received was that he was cursed, for some reason, and that something bad was about to happen; maybe not right away, but things were already in motion.

Yeah. Dallion shook his head. Let's go on with the next one.

I wouldn't recommend

Dallion left the realm, returning to the real world. The stench made his eyes water all over again. The splash, resulting in him landing back in the sewer sludge, made him vomit. Clearly, an emotional return to reality wasn't the best idea.

Never mind, the echo said.

Are there any more further in? Dallion brushed off the tears from his eyes while also holding his nose with his other hand.

Probably. There's only one way to find out for certain.

Breathing as shallowly as possible, Dallion went on. It took a while for him to get used to the stench again. Given what he had just experienced, though, it suddenly didn't seem too bad. In any event, it was preferable to the chaos that might befall the world.

The further in Dallion went, the deeper the sewer got. After close to an hour, he was knee deep in sewage. The only consolation was the knowledge that the runes outside of the sewers would let him wash everything off.

Not too long after, Dallion spotted another vortex, just as Nil had said there would be. This one was lodged in a tile on the side of the wall. Instead of entering its realm, Dallion used his Nox dagger to take it out. Since there was no need to go through the vortexes in immediate succession, it was much better to take it for absorption at a later time.

Given that the level of the sewage continued to increase, Dallion decided against continuing further in. Using his acrobatic skills, he dashed along the wall all the way to the exit. There, he stopped to finally enjoy some fresh water. Never had an illusion felt so nice. After spending ten minutes washing off the sludge from his boots and trousers, Dallion undressed and spent a long while relaxing in the stream.

Making use of his knowledge of symbols, he then rinsed his clothes and dried them up by drawing a heat symbol.

Better get a move on, Nil warned. Even with a pass, it's not a good idea to be out after sunset.

Monsters? Dallion asked, getting into his now clean and dry clothes.

Rules and regulations. Also, people don't like uppity novices, especially if they aren't related to nobles.

Right. Two vortexes wasn't bad for a first day. Any idea where to go hunting tomorrow?

More than a few. You better train your stomach, though. There are a few more sewage systems we'll need to go through. After that, we'll see how to proceed.