

Leveling up 671

Chapter 671: Cellar Infestation

The adrenaline from the vortex's absorption didn't let Dallion have a blink of sleep all night, constantly causing him to shift between agitation and restlessness. Most of the time he spent pacing throughout the room or entering his awakening realm with the desire to practice more symbol making. The truth was that his body was itching for a fight, even if his mind was well aware there was no point in doing so. Common item guardians were no challenge, and magic opponents were beyond his reach. In the end, he improved his window frame to platinum. The effort finally caused him to tire half an hour before the start of class. Fortunately, he spent half a day in the realm of the window frame sleeping. After that, it was back to normal.

After a quick wash, Dallion got dressed and went to the dining room for breakfast. The food was alright, although it couldn't remotely compare to Aspan's masterpieces.

You're eager today, Cheska joined him. Unlike most of the children, she tended only to skip breakfast, only going there for a cup of exotic juice. What happened?

This and that, Dallion replied, mouth half full. You?

Finished another symbol book. Will ask for a new one in class.

The way she said it suggested that she'd learned way more symbols than Dallion. Being a prodigy definitely was nice, making Dallion feel somewhat inadequate.

Are you trying to crack a thousand? he asked with a forced chuckle.

I'll try. The more I know, the better spells I'll be able to cast. At least that's what Raven said.

There was no mystery to whom she was referring to. If anything, Dallion was surprised the nickname had stuck. Up to now, nicknames and any form of reference other than the most trivially descriptive had slid off the black-haired noble within minutes.

How many do you think he knows?

Lots, Cheska replied curtly. I think he knows a lot more than he's showing. She turned to Dallion. I think you know a lot more as well.

Not in terms of magic. He felt the sudden need to defend himself. I'm nowhere near your guys.

The girl didn't seem convinced in the least. She was about to add something when Phoel entered the room along with his usual crowd. The fact that most of his posse had remained in the rank one class didn't seem to affect matters particularly. They still would group together, following his orders, and praising him even when there was no reason for it. Back on Earth, Dallion would have called him a middle manager. Here, he had a few other descriptors in mind, although he'd avoid using most of them in public. Cheska seemed to be of a similar opinion, for she quickly stood up.

See you in class, she said, making her way out. As she did, Dallion saw her draw the rune of cold on each of the tables she passed. The smooth surfaces clouded up, as the humidity in the air reacted with the sudden cold emanating from the tables.

Childish, to say the least, Nil grumbled.

She is a child, Dallion muttered, taking another bite from his sandwich.

A loud scream filled the room. A short distance away, someone from Phoils posse had leaned against a recently chilled table. While cruel as only a child could come up with, it also had a distinctly comedic element to it.

Hey, you! Huntling! Phoil shouted. Did you do this?

Huntling was the nickname Dallion had earned after a few weeks. The lack of imagination that went into it made it clear that it had originated in Phoils mind, who was also the only person who dared use it to Dallions face.

If I was that good at magic, do you think Id have stopped at something so harmless? Dallion smiled.

Phoils face turned red as anger emanated from him as loud as a siren. For a moment, Dallion thought that the large boy might start a fight in the dining room. However, cooler minds prevailed most likely the echoes within Phoils realm.

Do that again and Ill tell the instructor! he threatened.

Is this what it comes down to? Tattling to a teacher? Dallion felt annoyed. Spending so much time in the body of a child was starting to affect his personality.

Showing what was left of the sandwich into his mouth, Dallion stood up and calmly made his way past Phoils table, before leaving the room. The moment he went into the corridor, he heard the empty threats the children made regarding him, mostly because they believed he was out of earshot. It was so tempting to go back in and give them a piece of his mind. Doing so, though, was going to disrupt his progress. For the time being, the only thing Dallion had to focus on was symbol learning and vortex finding; and that was what he did.

During class, Dallion focused on the remaining symbols of the book. Getting the knack of using them presented no problem, and by noon he was given a second booklet to experiment with. The symbols there were twice more complicated, requiring nimble fingers. Having a reaction trait of sixty-one, though, ensured that wasnt a problem.

After lunch, Dallion returned to his room, where he entered the realm of the tile hed brought home, leading him to his second vortex. The guardian he encountered was utterly massive, towering above Dallion like a three-story rhinoceros. The method of spellcasting was similar to the first guardian, but instead of attempting to drain his magic, this one was trying to crush him using magic barriers. Fighting involved a lot of spark attacks and quite a few line attacks as well. It was an unusual method of fighting, making it impossible for Dallion to use his guard skills, or any of his main skills, for that matter. When it came to magic skills, though, smooth surfaces were perfect for writing magic symbols on.

When it came to practical combat use, Dallion realized how limiting his magic knowledge was. Even with more than a bit of ingenuity, it took a lot of effort to defeat the guardian with the twenty-one symbols he had learned. Quickly it became clear why Cheska was so eager to learn as many as possible, suggesting that she might be into vortex hunting as well.

Days seemed to fly by and once again Dallion felt he was lacking time despite spending days in the awakening realms. Learning became more and more difficult, often requiring days for the symbols

to be mastered. The more Dallion got used to the process, the more complex the next symbols became. The instructor assured him that there would come a point at which the complexity would plateau, but from what Dallion had discussed during his time in the dining room, neither Cheska nor the black-haired had neither of them had reached that level.

Afternoons were spent roaming the Academy grounds in search of vortexes. Going through the remaining five sewers wielded a single result, which Dallion absorbed immediately after a surprisingly short fight. Afterwards, the search continued in other remote areas, namely spots at which magic threads merged together. The tricky part was that since magic was in constant motion, converging at different places at different times. There was no certain way of knowing where a vortex would emerge, other than going to the magic rich locations with a relatively small number of visitors.

Two weeks after receiving his pass seal, Dallion had yet to find a fourth vortex, although he had become rather well known in a few building clusters throughout the area. And, as usual, there always was someone who wanted to make use of his hunter skills.

Maybe you should stop wearing your hunter emblem, Nil said as Dallion made his way into the seller of a small potions lab. The mage running it wasn't of particular high ranking, but even so had the authority to boss around a novice. Thus, Dallion had no choice but to complete the job for virtually free.

It's just a simple job. I'll get it done quickly.

That's not the point. Soon enough, everyone at the Academy will realize they have a free hunter at their disposal. Any guesses what will follow?

Hopefully, better pay.

You really don't know mages too well, do you?

A winding stairwell continued three floors below ground, ending in a massive wooden door. Dallion could see magic symbols drawn everywhere, keeping the air perfectly dry and fresh with a hint of chill. One could only imagine the horrors that lurked beneath the fake facade; or in Dallion's case, he could hear the whole colonies of moss covering the place. That wasn't the only thing he could hear, though.

Hey, Dallion said to the wooden door. Anything I should be worried about?

Define worried, the guardian verbally smirked. Last apprentice that went down there had to spend three weeks with the healers.

How do you know that?

He reminded the mage the next time the old goat sent him in. After that this was not addressed again and conveniently forgotten. Research was moved to another section of the building and everything continued as normal.

Quite a waste.

Hah! When you spend as much time as me here, you get used to things like that. The things I could tell you will drive you insane or bore you to death. The door paused for a while. Maybe both. Are you really sure you want to go there?

Its a job, Dallion sighed.

Fine by me. Just a few pieces of advice. Dont make any sudden movements and get ready to run fast.

Dallion, of course, did the complete opposite, opening the door and charging inside. Of course, before that he split into a dozen instances.

The first thing he found in the cellar were shelves and shelves of potions beaming with magic. The next thousands of emerald shardflies covering the walls and ceiling of the artificially large room. Never outside of awakening trials and item exploration had he seen such an amount.

Normally, Dallion would feel pretty confident in his abilities to resolve the situation with minimal effort. Lately, though, his animal communication skills werent too good.

Hello there, Dallion said, adding calm to his words.

The shardflies flicked their wings, turning the ceiling green.

Im not here to harm you. Dallion split in a new set of instances, keeping one outside the room at all times. I just want to lead you out of here.

Why? A shardfly asked. Its wings were slightly brighter than the rest, indicating that it was the flutters leader. Its nice here.

Not the greatest start, but at least the shardfly was talking and not trying to slice him to shreds.

I can find you a better place with lots of space. I took a whole group of ruby shardflies there a while ago.

Ruby shardflies? Several of the insects fluttered their wings. It was difficult to tell whether they were eager to see the specimens or wanted to get into a fight. Despite their looks, shardflies were vicious and aggressive creatures.

One remained with me, even here. I can take you to him, if you want.

Why dont you just order them out? Nil asked. Youve done it before.

You can tell my level, Dallion ignored the echo. You can guess what Im capable of, just as Im not lying. When was the last time anyone spoke to you?

The last mage who came here did. The shardfly leader flew off the ceiling, fluttering towards Dallions face. He tried to burn us all, but his magic was weak. Your magic is weaker.

Thats because Im not a mage. Im a hunter with the empathy trait.

You just want to get rid of us.

Yes, I've been asked to get you out of the cellar, but I don't want to get rid of you. I just want to move you somewhere else.

You can't do both. If you take us out of here, the building will crumble.

Chapter 672: Truth and Payment

Crumble how? Dallion asked.

The building guardian had indicated nothing of the sort. Just to be on the same side, Dallion had had a brief talk with him to check. The guardian seemed as surprised as anything, although he did admit not knowing how the shardfly infestation occurred in the first place.

The walls are made of us, the shardfly replied. If all of us leave, there'll be nothing holding the building.

An instance of Dallion made its way to the far wall in the room. On cue, masses of shardflies moved to the side, revealing an opening or rather a doorway leading further in. Purple light came from within, illuminating the entire space. Whatever was there had a lot of magic.

Did the mage build you? Dallion asked the building.

I was created three centuries ago, the guardian said with pride. Mages come and go. Some of them modify me, adding a new floor or basement. None of them bother mending me. They just slap their symbols on top. It's unpleasant.

When this is over I'll mend you, Dallion went through into the new room.

If the previous part of the cellar had plenty of shardflies, this was literally composed of them. Dallion could sense them in the walls and floor not as part of it, but rather the building blocks that composed it.

See? The light emerald shardfly flew onto Dallion's shoulder. Told you.

Yes, you did. Dallion looked around.

At first glance, there was nothing remarkable about the room: a few workbenches, an iron chest and a few wooden mannequins. The latter did raise some questions, though, after a brief conversation with their guardians it became clear that they were just brought down here to be out of the way. The interesting part came when Dallion tried talking to the chest. Not only did it contain the greatest amount of magic, but the item itself was an artifact, more specifically a sphere item.

Dallion expected the chest to be locked tight, but to his surprise it opened without issue. The mage either felt confident that no one would venture into his lab, or he had lost the chest's key, for he had filled it with aether cubes the size of a man's fist without any safeguards. A single of the cubes was a veritable fortune. The magic coming from the chest's contents was massive, making their way into the room itself.

This woke you up, didn't it? Dallion asked, closing the chest again.

This was definitely a first. He had seen a lot of weird things in ruins as a hunter, but this was the first time he'd come across anyone digging their way into a shardfly hive. The creatures had

probably been in hibernation for centuries, surviving on a constant diet of low magic that was abundant in the area. That had changed when the mage had created another room and brought a strong source of magic.

Yeah, the shardfly replied. It feels more comfortable in the other room.

Dallion sighed. He could see the issue. It was both simpler and more complicated than he had hoped. Whether or not the structural integrity of the building would be compromised should the shardflies leave was beside the issue. Based on the emotions emanating from everywhere in the room, it was clear that the creatures had no desire to leave. No doubt the mage had tried to force them out, resulting in an appropriate response. Getting the insects back to their nest would be difficult, if not outright impossible.

Once again, Dallion faced a choice. At his current level, he stood a good chance of killing off the shardflies, thus solving the mages problem. The prospect terrified him almost as much as the ease with which he considered it.

What will you do if the sources of magic are removed? Dallion asked.

Youd steal them? The shardfly flicked its wings menacingly.

Someone will.

The creature hesitated, pondering the question. Clearly, there wasnt a simple answer as far as it was concerned.

What if the mage puts the magic you like in your nest, then seals it off? That way everyones happy. Dallion paused for a few seconds. You can tell what Im capable of. Id really not fight you, but if you dont want to leave or get back to your hive

The shardfly briskly flew off his shoulder, moving away. Hundreds of more did the same, bearing the wall that separated the two rooms.

As I said, I dont want to do that unless I have to. Dallion stressed, as he picked up the chest. Which of the magic do you like? Still combat splitting, he returned back to the main part of the cellar. Upon reaching the middle, he put the chest down. Ill carry them for you.

The sensation of curiosity and calm that emanated from the shardflies transformed into fear. None of them were willing to enter into a fight they had no prospect of winning. Their species had behaved the same way in the wilderness. The reason why Ruby and the rest of the ruby shardflies had agreed to join Dallion was because they had determined his strength. If that hadnt been the case, theyd have attacked, or at best ignored, him. These ones here, while considerably more numerous, were a lot weaker.

For several long seconds Dallion stood still, waiting to see whether they fight or submit to his request. Some of them flew in the direction of the smaller room. The few became a trickle, then a flood. Layers of shardflies stacked one over the other, causing the room to shrink.

What do you want me to put in there? Dallion asked, letting out a mental sigh of relief.

These , the light green shardfly said, landing on a shelf of potions. Everything here.

There was no telling how expensive the potions were, though given the intensity of the magic within them, Dallion could assume they were worth a pretty penny. Even so, he assumed that it was better than not having access to the entire cellar.

With each flask he put in the room, the shardflies fears seemed to decrease. After placing the final one, the creatures sealed off their end of the entrance. Despite the truce, they had no intention of allowing Dallion in the nest.

That was a bit extreme, Nil said.

It worked, didnt it? Besides, its better than the alternatives.

Even so, dont automatically resort to using the stick. It has a tendency to get easier every time.

Dallion took one final look at the room, then made his way up the stairwell to give an explanation to the mage. The loss of a few dozen potions, not to mention a whole room, was hardly the best news. Hopefully, the man would understand the situation.

The mages chamber was located in the buildings attic. Unlike most of the other potion makers, he was the type who preferred to work alone, isolated from everyone else. Dallion suspected that to be the reason he had no power whatsoever when it came to Academy matters. The little influence was entirely due to the potion making.

On the way, Dallion glanced at the work area of the building. Apprentices were rushing to and fro tending to stills and other equipment involved in the process. None of them even noticed him, or cared for that matter.

Arriving at the door, Dallion took a deep breath and knocked.

Yes? a deep voice said from inside, as the door opened on its own.

Ive solved your problem, sir, Dallion said.

The mage was sitting at his overly large desk twenty feet away. The room was made bigger thanks to spatial symbols on the walls.

What? Really? The man stared, as if Dallion were an overripe tomato. How?

When you expanded your cellar, you dug into a shardfly nest. A very large shardfly nest. I convinced the shardflies to get back there by offering them a few of your potions. Oh, and I took your chest out of there, so theres no need to worry about it.

You gave away some of my potions? The man stood up, his face red with rage. Do you have any idea of the time and effort necessary to create those?!

Less than building a new lab, Id say? Dallion struggled not to cross his arms. To be honest, even his sarcasm was a bit heavy, considering his current status. That was the only option without things escalating to a fight, sir. If that had happened, youd have lost everything.

Just to be on the safe side, Dallion used his music skills to add a lot of calm and joy to his words. This wasnt something he would have dared against one of the stronger mages, but this one didnt look like someone whod catch the interference. A few seconds later, the man calmed down, the color of his face returning to normal.

Id seal off the entrance youve made, Dallion continued. Just in case.

Hmm. Just a few potions, you said?

A few dozen. A lot less that you could have lost.

The mages left-hand fingers danced through the air. His symbol making was fast and elegant, completing the spell in seconds. Dallion managed to recognize the symbol for space, when suddenly the room contracted, as if the door was pulled to a foot from the desk.

Im not paying you a thing, the mage said with suppressed bitterness. With the potions youve cost me, consider yourself lucky Im not telling your instructors about this!

Dont worry, he wont dare, Nil said. If he could have done something, he would have already.

I understand. Dallion pursed his lips. Yet, not paying one hunter is the same as not paying all. I doubt this incident will cause hunters to stop taking Academy tasks, at least not right away. However, it would be an unhealthy precedent to have, especially since you dragged me to take care of your problem. I might be an apprentice, but when doing hunter jobs, standard rates and conditions apply. Unless I decide differently.

A glint of fear emerged in the mages eyes. He opened his mouth to argue, but quickly closed it again.

Hes smarter than he looks, Dallion thought.

There are no stupid mages, dear boy. Just arrogant ones.

You saved the chest, right? the man asked, seeking for a way to save face. Nothings missing from it?

The aether cubes are all there.

There was still a large amount of reluctance emanating from the mage.

You dont have to pay me in gold, sir. Not that it was a lot. Knowledge would work just as well.

Knowledge? The mag narrowed his eyes.

Anything that will help me become a better mage.

The mages fingers danced through the air again. This time, the spell caused a small booklet to appear in his hand. Looking at it, Dallion saw Basics of Potion Making written on the cover. It was unclear how valuable the book waslikely not particularly much since it had the word basics in the title. The one main advantage was that Dallion was able to read it.

Here. The mage tossed the booklet at Dallions face.

Faster than the human eye, Dallion caught the book inches from his face. This was the first time a client had resented him so muchpossibly with the exception of Countess Priscord. Every fiber in Dallions body told him that he might have problems further down the line. However, this was the

Academy it was expected that he'd have problems further down the line. The trick was not to piss off the really important ones. Everything else could be amended or renegotiated.

Thank you, sir. Dallion smiled. Please call me if you have any other issues with the shardflies. It'll be less costly than calling anyone else.

A quick spell later and the distance between Dallion and the mage had increased to a hundred feet. An interesting tactic and markedly passive-aggressive.

I'll be waiting for you to call me, sir, Dallion shouted, not in the least phased. Spellcrafting started to lose its glamor, and after everything he had been through, such tricks weren't even impressive. Enjoy a nice day.

The door slammed shut in front of his face. Now, there was nothing else but to go back to the library.

Chapter 673: Reverse Magic Principle

You'll get punished if you keep stealing cups from the dining hall, Nil sighed. Remember, it's not about skill level, but the knowledge how to use spells adequately.

Ignoring him, Dallion drew a space symbol on the side of the cup. Based on everything he knew that was supposed to make the cup larger. Instead, it just made it heavier. The logic of that anomaly evaded him. By all accounts weight was supposed to have such an effect, yet there was no denying that the cup had become heavier.

What am I getting wrong?

Where do I start?

All the stretched rooms had the space symbol. It has to work.

If symbols were the be-all of magic, people wouldn't have bothered to learn spells. Instead of complaining, maybe you should read the potion making book you got into all that trouble to get?

Dallion groaned. Reading wasn't the problem. Initially, he was even looking forward to it, going through the booklet the moment he got back to his room. It was at that point that confusion hit him like a ton of bricks.

Trying to make sense of what was written was no different from asking a seven-year-old to understand a book about string theory. Some of the words and concepts made sense, most didn't. After hours of page turning all that Dallion managed to piece together was that potions had nothing in common to what he imagined them to be. For one thing, they were never meant to be consumed.

It was not by accident that the booklet defined them as liquid spells. In this world, they were just that: a spell that activated once the potion was poured on its intended target. Sadly, that was all that Dallion was able to make out. Any details regarding how to dissolve the magic symbols were either nonexistent or described in such a fashion that Dallion had skipped them altogether. Of all the times he had drawn a symbol in water, only the liquid was affected.

I think I'll get some rest. Dallion left the cup on the floor and went to his bed.

Giving up so soon? Nil criticized.

Are you offering to help?

The echo didnt reply.

Didnt think so.

I can teach you, the strings of the harpsisword vibrated.

Huh? Dallion paused. You could?

Galatea is the patron Moon of nymphs, of course Id know magic. And now that you do too, I can teach you.

How come youve never told me?

There never was the need.

She didnt say that she and Dallion werent talking as much as before, but also she didnt have to. The times Dallion had gone to her for advice had gotten fewer and fewer throughout the years. Most of the conversations took part in the real world, which although efficient remained impersonal.

Coming? Harp urged.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Dallions realm appeared around him. A thin layer of purple shimmer in the sky like the aurora borealis back on Earth.

YOU ARE LEVEL 77

Body: 50

Mind: 79

Reaction: 61

Perception: 51

Empathy: 50

Magic: 8

A blue rectangle floated in the air, in the space between Dallions ever increasing skill pillars. The values were impressive, though just as before not enough. Dallion couldnt wait till his magic trait got to its fifties.

The skills pillars had also filled out. The size of walls, they now had dozens of frames with an item inside. Each frame represented an individual skill in its field. Lately the spellcraft pillar had acquired a substantial increase, holding over fifty symbols, all named and framed.

We can build a palace if you want, Gen said a few steps away. Therell be more space for skills.

Dallion shook his head. He liked being in the open.

Anything new with July? he asked.

Same as before. Lux is spending more time with him. It seems to help a bit, but not much.

Yeah. A bit but not much. This was why Dallion didnt like visiting his real without a reason: it brought back memories he wished to avoid. Im off to train. Tell me if anything changes.

Right.

The trip to the bay used to be a pleasant experience. It was designed to have the best elements of an island paradise, complete with fine sand, crystal waters, and lush vegetation. Dallion ignored it all. When he reached the water, he found Onda waiting for him. There was no denying that the guardian was among those feeling neglected. Unlike Harp, he hadnt done anything for months. Dallion had stopped forging lately and after learning the new vibration attack of the harpsisword, the hammer wasnt particularly used in combat either.

She told me to take you to her, the teen nymph teen the moment Dallion got near. He was wearing a new set of clothes covered in glowing stripes and symbols. In the past Dallion used to think that Onda was merely a fan of the clockwork and cyberpunk aesthetic due to his link to forging. Now, though, he noticed that all the symbol designs were magical.

Thanks, Onda, he said. I know the way.

Were not going to her place. To get this right, you need to train in the ocean.

That made sense, although it still didnt explain why Harp hadnt told him or come to take him there herself.

The water hardened as they approached it, forming a path further into the sea.

When will Dark crash your realm? Onda asked. Been ages since we chilled.

Not in a while. Having a dragon fly to the Academy was a terrible idea. I promise to talk to him, though.

Cool.

Will you take part in the training?

Me? The nymph laughed. No way. Im just a crafter.

Dallion had his doubts, but let it slide for the moment.

Several miles into the bay, a garden emerged. Grass, trees, and well-kept hedges formed the perfect picnic spot, if only they werent made entirely of water. Looking closely Dallion saw the multitude of magic threads within the clear surface. Unlike the large glowing threads he was used to, these were spread out clusters with each no larger than a strand of spiderweb.

Natural magic is different acquired magic, the entire garden vibrated in Harps voice. Its a lot more elegant and allows greater control.

Ill try to remember that.

A water gazebo emerged in the middle of the garden. Harp was standing within. Her hair flowed down all the way to the seas surface, glistening like gold. The usual robe of opaque water was replaced by a knee length tunic.

Youve learned quite a few symbols. Harp made a sign for Dallion to join her in the gazebo.

Less than you.

You've still made me proud. After what you've been through, many would have given up and chosen a life of calm someplace to be forgotten. You pushed on.

Nothing could create the sensation of guilt like an underserved compliment. Dallion didn't feel like he had achieved a lot. On the contrary, he felt that all his achievements were obtained through sacrificing his relations with people he knew: family, friends, guardians, familiars, even Euryale.

How do I make potions? Dallion asked. When I tried, I placed the symbol on the liquid, not within it.

The nymph took a step forward. The entire gazebo disappeared with a splash, returning to its liquid form.

When you paint on the piece of clothing, do you change its fabric? the sea surface vibrated, forming the words. To really change the cloth, you must add multiple threads while making it.

I must draw the symbol with water? Dallion was confused.

Yes, and no. You must stretch out the symbol while making it. You've seen the threads that control water. Draw the symbol doing those. That way, the water would not be affected by the spell, but will contain it. The moment the liquid gets agitated, the symbol will snap back into its original form, affecting anything it's in contact with.

Strangely enough, the explanation made sense. It still gave the impression that potions were no different from vials of trinitroglycerin. One false move might set off the spell. Good thing Dallion wasn't aware of the fact when dealing with the shardflies, or he might have been a lot more nervous.

That's it?

Those are the basics. There's a lot more involved, but that's where the mastery of the mage shines through. We used to make a lot of liquid magic during our wars. For humans, the process isn't as easy. That's where skill comes in.

Dallion looked at the water. Bending down, he scooped some of it. The liquid dripped between his fingers, refusing to be controlled.

How do I do that? Dallion asked.

Before you draw symbols, you need to first learn how to control the water.

Isn't that impossible?

It takes a lot of effort and practice, but it isn't impossible. It's all about extending your magic into the water. Furies do the same with air, dwarves with ores.

Release thin strands of magic, Dallion told himself. Presented in such fashion, it didn't sound too difficult. Concentrating, Dallion focused on extending some magic from the tips of his fingers. The first threads were thin, though nowhere near as thin as they should be. It still felt like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube, only this time Dallion was trying to block part of the opening.

The next time Dallion put more effort into the tip of his fingers. In his mind, he imagined them like an iris he had to close. The result was iffy, creating a thread still dozens of times larger than it was supposed to be.

The following results were no different. All that changed was the effort involved. The more Dallion focused, the more energy went into the tip of his fingers, causing them to go numb. Yet the thinner the thread became, the less magic was able to exit his body.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion kept on trying until, at one point, his magic refused to go beyond his fingertips altogether.

Damn it! Dallion hissed, stopping abruptly. His hands and fingers felt as if theyd been through a shredder. Even the calm water wasnt able to get rid of the pain.

Rest a little, Harp said. Theres no need to rush.

A chair emerged from the water a step from Dallion. Any other day, hed appreciate the gesture. Now, part of his mind saw it as her mocking him. In the end, he did sit down, completely relaxing his arms after he did.

I didnt know you knew spellcraft, he said, focusing on the nymph. A white rectangle appeared above her.

HARPSISWORD GUARDIAN

Species: NYMPH

Class: SHADOW

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY: 101**

- **MIND: 78**

- **REACTION: 120**

- **PERCEPTION: 97**

- **MAGIC: 51**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**

- **GUARD**

- **ACROBATICS**

- **ATHLETICS**

- **MUSIC**

- **SPELLCRAFT**

- **WIND SLASH (Species Unique)**

- **EMOTION SLASH (Species Unique)**
- **SOUND ENTANGLE (Species Unique)**
- **WATER FORM (Species Unique)**

Weakness: NONE

There were several changes since the last time he'd looked at it. Some were due to him having increased his perception trait. Yet, there was no reason for the spellcraft skill to be invisible.

You didn't have magic before, Harp said, as if that explained everything.

So, you were a magic swordsman during the war? Or something similar?

Just a swordsman. When everyone is magic, no one is.

That's not how things worked, but Dallion nodded.

So, you weren't a mage?

Mages were a lot different for us. They are just people who are good at nothing else. It's different from the other races. Even before Galatea hid, acquired magic was a rare gift for the other races. They considered mages exceptional. We saw them as failures. Even those able to cast powerful spells were shunned, if that's the only thing they were capable of doing.

Talk about culture shock. Dallion shook his hands. The numbness was starting to subside, replaced by the irritating pain of pins and needles. Can you cast powerful spells?

Let the past be the past. You have the future to worry about.

Chapter 674: Leaking Magic

For hours, Dallion kept on trying to create magic strands. He had changed the approach dozens of times, yet each time he thought he was on the verge of a breakthrough, nothing came out. Several times he tried combining it with other skills, only to find they made the task more complicated. The awakening markers were of no help, either. Ideal for symbol creation and one might assume actual spellcrafting they didn't provide any clues on using natural magic.

Give it time, the water beneath Dallion's vibrated. Like everything else, it's a trick. Once you figure it out, things will become much easier.

It would help if you give me some hints.

Dallion tried pulling the magic out of his finger. The process required nearly no effort, allowing him to create a thread the size of a string. It was a lot better than anything he'd achieved so far, but still far from the desired width.

Am I getting close? Dallion wondered. Or am I deluding myself?

Up till now, he hadn't focused on how mages cast their spells. All that he'd seen were finger movements and symbols appearing. Not once, though, had he paid attention to the way the magic threads emerged.

Closing his eyes, Dallion went through everything he knew so far. Based on the way he'd seen furies and nymphs control natural magic, it had to be done quickly and seamlessly. Using his current way

of pushing it out was too inefficient. Even Palag, his instructor, had said that in magic the trick was pulling not pushing. However, no one had used both hands to do so.

Am I overthinking things again? he asked.

Without a doubt, Nil replied. But youre on the right track. Or at least on a road that might lead to the right track.

Another non-answer, but at least an encouraging one. Knowing the old echo, this was short of outright praise. If pulling was on the right track, the only thing left to solve was to find the method to do it properly.

Dallion had often been told that in this world, reality was different from preconceived perceptions. Most of the time, it was he himself preventing himself from progressing forward. Since magic was a special trait, what if that was literally the case? So far, Dallion had assumed that magic was within people and they had to force it out in order to create spells and symbols. What if it was the opposite? The magic could well be a free force and it was objects that kept it locked within. If that were the case, all he had to do was stop stopping it from

Thousands of threads streamed out of Dallions entire body. The mere thought had opened the floodgates causing it to rush out. For a fraction of a second Dallion was thrilled; he had finally uncovered the solution. Then the harsh realization came: he had no idea how to stop it.

He felt the warmth flee his body, leaving him cold and empty. Out of desperation, he tried to grab the fleeing magic or block it with his hands, but that only made his magic leak faster.

Its alright, the surrounding water said, rising up to wrap him like a warm blanket. Dont be afraid.

As soothing as it was, Dallion wasnt able to stop his panicthe irrational fear of losing something he couldnt do without. His vision blurred as everything around him turned purple. Moments later, the purple turned to black.

You really outdid yourself this time, a voice said, one that he hadnt heard in a while. Always jumping from one extreme to the next.

She told me Dallions words echoed around him. She told me this was the way.

And she was right. This is the way if youre a nymph. You must pay more attention to such things. Your time of innocence is over. From her on I wont be able to protect you.

Protect me? Who are you?

You should have asked that question a dozen levels ago. Take care, Dal. I hope well be able to speak again in the future.

Dallion opened his eyes. He was floating in a sphere of water just about the sea surface. There was no sign of the garden. Two figures were standing nearby. Even through the distortion, Dallion recognized Harp and Onda. For a moment, it seemed that Onda was kneeling.

Youre awake, the water sphere said right before pouring down into the sea. All that remained of it was a chair of water, keeping Dallion from falling. How do you feel?

C-cold, Dallion managed to say.

His hands and feet felt freezing. There was an ember of heat in his chest. Looking down, Dallion saw a small ball of magic, no larger than a pebble. Was that all that was left of his magic?

Its painful experiencing it for the first time. The water vibrated as Harp approached. You did well.

Did I lose my magic?

Yes, and no. You cant lose anything thats yours while in your realm. The magic left your body but also went into your body. Thats why it was important to experience it here. In any other realm, or in the real world, things would have been very different.

I could have died?

There is such a possibility. The nymph didnt look away, saying the truth as it was. The Academy would have protected you, probably Galatea as well. He doesnt like wasting followers, especially now.

Warmth spread to Dallions stomach. Cautiously, he stood up, keeping a hand on the chair at all times.

Dont exert yourself. The magic that was dispersed into your realm is slowly making its way to you. Until all of it is back, your body will feel weaker.

That was an understatement. Dallion felt as if hed been run over by a truck. Seven standing was making him feel tired, not to mention slightly dizzy. Still, he refused to sit back down.

So, thats the trick? he asked. Not push the magic out of me, but manage how its pulled out.

Yes. Harp nodded. Then youll focus on controlling the amount, and finally the form. Once youre able to do that youll be able to make simple enchant potions.

Simple enchant potions? Dallion thought. After all that effort, hed hoped for something more. Magic and spellcasting were something else. No wonder that people who had it were so arrogant. It probably took decades of non-stop learning and practice for someone to cast even the simplest spell. When Dallion had first arrived at the Academy, he thought that hed have learned it all in less than a month. That amount of time was not enough to even become an apprentice. Even with all the advantages he had and the political support, he hadnt even made it halfway through novice.

How many times do I have to go through this? he asked.

A few. By the sound of it, it was going to be substantially more. It gets easier each time.

As Dallion found out, even if that were the case, the experience remained just as painful. The closest thing he could compare it with was getting a really bad case of the flu. The cold, the shivers, the weakness, and slow recovery were an inseparable part of it all, no matter how many times he went through it.

After twenty times Dallion was able to block half the gaps, making the magic to no longer leak out of him like a sieve, but rather a bucket full of holes. The scholarly skills proved to be quite helpful, allowing him to gradually visualize the leaks within his body and work on blocking them.

Hours turned into days, then weeks. The only rest Dallion got was the time he was waiting for his magic to be restored. Hunger slowly reared its ugly head, urging him to return to the real world for a snack. Gritting his teeth, Dallion pushed on.

Three weeks later, he was able to release magic only through his fingers. Another week and he was able to control where the leaks occurred. Then and only then did he concentrate on controlling the release. As it turned out, the width of the thread wasn't the only thing that he had to focus on. Before, when he was forcefully expanding magic out of him, he was able to control the speed by which he did so. This new method required he relearn everything up till now, including the magic symbols he had memorized.

It's already been two months, Harp said as Dallion drew symbols in the air. You don't need to learn everything on one go.

But it'll be better if I did.

In the real world, it had been hours since he had received the potion booklet. Here it seemed like a lifetime ago. There was no denying that his efforts had paid off. After weeks of pain and suffering, he had finally mastered the reverse method of magic, allowing him to create symbols multiple times faster than before. Unfortunately, he still was unable to create them in water.

Potion making is a difficult art. The nymph placed her hand on his shoulder. You should return to the real world. You can always come back in a day or so.

I still haven't learned all the symbols I knew, Dallion lied.

The nymph smiled in response.

Have you used magic since I found you?

You know I have. Harp replied. You'd have seen my spellcrafting skill otherwise.

That's not what I meant.

I know, and for now, I prefer not to answer.

Is it something to do with your past?

Does it matter? Every strong guardian has a history. Every exceptional item has a strong guardian. I have been guardian of this harp's sword ever since the banishment of my race. After all that time, there are many things I regret, and more than I've come to regret as a sword. Knowing them won't help you.

Dallion differed. Knowing the history of the past always ended up being useful. If he didn't know about the history of the dryads, he'd never have stopped the plague, or acquired the empathy trait. If he didn't know about the Stars' past, there was a good chance he wouldn't have defeated him.

I'll show you all of my magic once you defeat me, Harp said.

You know I'm not able to.

One day you will.

Dallion considered it. The arrogant streak in him whispered that he could take her on. He had defeated the Star, after all. Thankfully, the voice of reason was strong enough to tell him not to bother. Looking at her, he had a better chance of passing his awakening trials.

Ive a few more symbols left, he changed the subject. Once Im done, Ill get out of here.

The proposal was found acceptable. Harp disappeared beneath the surface, leaving Dallion to his own devices. Not wasting any time, he got back to practicing.

It was the complex symbols that caused the greatest number of problems. Most of the time, Dallions fear of losing his magic kicked in, making him stop the threads leaving his body before they had a chance to complete the rune. It felt like forcing himself to take a step forward when standing on the edge of a cliff, but force himself he did. Days were needed for him to reach a point at which he comfortably could create all the symbols he knew, but eventually, he got there.

Do I get any achievements? he asked as he sat down on the water to rest a bit.

Nothing by the sound of waves and wind replied.

That bad?

It might not be a good idea to agonize the Moons, dear boy. Theres nothing to be gained and plenty to be lost.

Dont you think it was worth an achievement?

While a lot of progress has been shown, you havent actually done anything. You were able to create magic symbols before, even if in a different fashion. And you definitely havent created a potion yet. Or do you want an achievement for training?

No, I dont. Although it would have been nice. I just wish theyd show me if I was headed in the right direction.

Dont worry. Theyll be certain to let you know if youre not.

Chapter 675: Cast from the Past

Hunger greeted Dallion when he returned to the real world. In Nerosal, or even in the wilderness, that wasnt an issue, since he could always go find some food. Here, though, things were different. Academy rules forbade food to be kept in the personal rooms, and novices werent allowed to wander about the corridors during the night. After two months of hunger, though, Dallion decided to take a chance.

Ruby, Dallion said while drawing silence symbols on the soles of his shoes. Want to go out a bit?

The shardfly fluttered off the roof and onto his shoulder. After spending weeks in a closed room even if it were artificially enlarged he was eager to stretch his wings.

No drawing in the corridors. Dallion put on his shoes then jumped a few times on the floor. No sound came out. Pleased, Dallion stepped out of his room.

There was always the fear that the seal would somehow prevent him from proceeding. Thankfully, nothing of the sort happened. Dallion slowly closed the door, then rushed along the corridor towards

the apprentice dining hall. From what he had heard, food was served there at all times, and no one bothered to keep an eye on who went in or out.

Even at this time, there were plenty of people in the street-like corridors. Apprentices knew no rest, pretty much like university students back on Earth. The difference was that none of the apprentices Dallion had seen looked like partiers.

Humming a tune to make himself inconspicuous, Dallion made his way to the nearest apprentice section of the building. The apprentices were already swamped with tasks, rushing to do the bidding of their mentors. A touch of distraction, thanks to Dallions music skills, made him virtually invisible.

At the second corridor, Dallion turned left, then after a few hundred feet left again. The smell of food coming from the dining room was more than enough to let him know exactly where the dining room was. His stomach groaned, rebelling against the hunger it had been subjected to.

Quickening his pace, Dallion rushed into the room. The place was large and practically deserted. A pair of apprentices rushed to grab some plates with food from one of the tables, then exited just as quickly as theyd come in. Unlike novices, apprentices were encouraged to take their food with them, to be able to work more.

Dallion piled the contents of one plate onto another, thenafter shoving a sandwich in his mouthtook it and made his way out. So far, so good. All that was left now was to make it back to his room and

Hey, you! a sharp female voice said behind Dallion. Come here.

Calmly, Dallion turned around. A mage in a blue robe was standing there. Based on the Academy hierarchy, she had to be a full Academy mage, which meant she could cause a lot of problems for him, should she decide.

Yes, mage. Dallion walked up to her. Her magic was so bright that it filled her body completely. Music wasnt going to work on someone like her. The only chance Dallion had was to try and be convincing enough in his explanations.

Do you know what time it is? The woman looked down at him. Small wrinkles around her eyes and mouth made her look ancient from Dallions current perspective. The perfectly hazel hair and the lack of runes suggested that she had to be somewhere in her thirties.

Yes, mage, Dallion replied.

Dont be cheeky with me! the woman snapped. Youre not supposed to be in the corridors, let alone here. Dont they feed you enough in class? Whos your instructor? Ill have a word with him regarding your future at the

I sent him to get me some snacks, a new voice said, one that instantly sent chills down Dallions spine. He knew that voice more than well. Is that a problem?

A new mage approached along the corridor. Judging by her outfit, she too was an Academy mage. It was not the robe that frightened Dallion, but the otherworldly shimmering that surrounded her.

Katka, the first mage said with pursed lips. Dallion could tell by the emanations coming from the two that there was no love lost between them. Fallen so low that youd have novices do your chores?

No, but I'd make an exception for a hunter. Katka smiled. And an old friend. We go way back, don't we, Dal?

The mage narrowed her eyes. Otherworlders, she said in disgust. I won't stay quiet about this.

When have you ever? If that's all, I have some catching up to do.

With an audible hiss, the woman turned around and continued along the corridor. Her footsteps were loud enough to suggest that she was deliberately stabbing the floor with her heels.

Pissing her off is always fun, Katka whispered, looking as the form of her colleague disappeared down the corridor. Lucky that I showed up. She's unmatched when it comes to raising a stink.

Thank you, mage. Dallion felt like vomiting in his mouth upon saying that. She had tried to kill him several times, not to mention maroon him in a foreign world. As far as the Academy was concerned, though, she was a respected superior.

No need for that. It's just the two of us. She looked at the plate of food. Having a case of the munchies?

I did some training in my realm. There was no point in lying. And lost track of time.

Looks like you've spent over a week there. The woman took a few steps forward until she was a foot from Dallion. Level seventy-seven. And a full hunter? Impressive. You might even cause some damage in a fight. Tell me, were you the one who killed Gassil?

Dallion felt a block of ice form in his stomach. He knew from the rogue mage's memory that he'd been in the same faction as Katka. There was no indication that the two had been close, but he couldn't be sure based on a brief snippet of the man's life.

No, he replied, doing his best to maintain a facade of calm.

No, you probably didn't have the skills back then. He was a complete loser. I don't know why the old hag liked him so much. He'd go on and on what a genius he was back on Earth, but always messed up when it came to doing stuff here. To think he'd form an alliance with the Star. She scoffed. And he even messed that up.

Dallion remained quiet. All he wanted right now was the conversation to end as quickly as possible.

So, what have you been up to? You look a bit younger since we last talked.

Learning symbols, he mumbled.

Going through that? Poor you. It drove me crazy back when I was a novice. I was almost thrown out of the Academy.

The statement caused Dallion to arch both brows.

Well, not quite. It felt like hell. Then, when I got to spellcasting, they said I was a prodigy. Fancy that?

Dallion had serious doubts, but he couldn't downplay her skills. By all accounts it was her self-confidence that had caused her to lose against him Ji and Eury. If she hadn't toyed around, she'd have almost certainly won.

What do you want, Katka?

Is that a way to treat your superior? she smirked. I just came to see you. The old man will be pissed. He was against any of us coming into contact with you, but wheres the fun in that? I must say youve ended up in quite the cohort of monsters. Several prodigies, several extremely well connected, and then theres youan official hunter and what was it? She paused, pretending to search for the term. The Hero of Nerosal. Katkas smile was so large that one might think shed bite Dallions throat out. A pity that she chased you out because of that thing with the phoenix. Although, theres a good chance youll be vindicated.

What do you mean?

Wetie province has entered open civil war. Both the Archduke and Countess Priscord have assembled their allies and have gone against each other. Since neither side is willing to hold the traditional one-on-one fight, itll be another bloody and prolonged war during which both capitals will suffer.

No! Dallion thought. Hed heard rumors that things werent going well on the outside, though nothing of such magnitude. The Academy had managed to block any news coming from the outside, which was quite impressive considering the amount of mages flying about in search of vortexes. Most probably, they felt safe enough not to care.

If the rivalry in the Wetie province had turned bloody, there was no telling how many people would die. Dherma and Dallions family were safe all the way south. However, his friends werent As fate would have it, most of them were in one of the two capitals, suggesting that they might face one another in battle.

Nil, Dallion hissed. Why didnt you tell me?

What would that accomplish exactly? The echo asked unapologetically. Youd rush out of here and stop the war singlehandedly? Or maybe youll pick a side? Tell me, who are you going to go with: your childhood sweetheart, or her great aunt?

If Katka werent here, Dallion would have clenched his fists. The sudden news had made him feel so helpless. Worst of all, Nil was completely right. Despite his current level, he was too weak to change the outcome of the war. At most, hed be a valuable pawn to one side, yet there was no obvious side to choose. Both nobles hated him, and at the same time, he had friends associated with either.

Why doesnt the emperor do anything about it? he asked.

The emperor has his own problems. Hes already lost half a province. Archduke Dreud has joined the fighting himself, along with a few other notable nobles. If the province falls, the imperial capital will be exposed. Compared to that, a few squabbles are nothing.

Why are you telling me this?

Why not? Were both from Earth. She took a sandwich from Dallions plate. Better get back to your room, novice. Youre not allowed out so late.

With a chuckle, Katka walked off. After a few moments, so did Dallion. This was a meeting he was hoping to avoid.

She wasnt here by accident, Nil said. High-level mages avoid the Learning Hall if they could get away with it.

She came to give me a warning, Dallion whispered. The timing was too perfect. Until now, Dallion had hoped that the White Eye were the only faction keeping tabs on him. That was nave. Given his special circumstances, others had to be doing so as well. And to mess with my head.

Good thing theres no chance of that happening, eh?

One things curious, though. She didnt say anything about Eury. Dallion turned the corner. And neither did you. What are you hiding?

No, Im not getting into that. The gorgon seems to be fine and well, and not associated with either side. That should be enough for you.

Nil

The information wont help you either way. And if you think not knowing affects your performance, trust me that telling you will make things worse.

Good thing youre not the chatty type.

Focus on your current problems. Youve still to learn several dozen more symbols, not to mention raise your magic by a few levels. I know you still feel you need to be involved with everything going on, but thats part of another life. As you are now, youre not strong enough to let both lives merge.

Damn it! Dallion thought. If only he had passed those three awakening trials earlier, things would be different. The Academy had the power to protect him from the outside world, but in doing so, it was also keeping the outside world from him.

Ignorance is bliss, is that it? Dallion asked.

Knowledge is like prophetic powers: you only want to have it if you can affect change. Without that, its pure torture.

Chapter 676: Training Developments

Bumping into Katka had made Dallion lose his appetite to the point that even Ruby wasnt able to snap him out of it. The shardfly was initially pleased with the brief journey outside of the room, though seeing Dallions state had gone back to being moody as before.

From a logical perspective, Dallion was supposed to be pleased. It wasnt like he had come across Alien. Considering how much the man despised him, that would have been more than a little awkward. Yet coming across anyone from the otherworlder faction was a stark reminder of how much influence they held within the Academy. Gassil had been the weakest of them and even he had reached the position of Archmage assistant years ago. Everyone else was at least at Katkas level. So far, Dallion had met two of them, and one was the equivalent of a dean. So much for

hoping that he'd find peace at the Academy. He had only himself to blame, though. He'd gone to the Academy not because he was running towards something, but running from Countess Priscord. As it turned out, the whole world was full of assholes. They just tended to hide low the first few months.

Im fine, Ruby, Dallion lied, forcing himself to take another bite of his food. Did you like the trip outside?

The shardfly flicked its wings.

How about you join me from now on?

Nil had warned that bringing familiars along could be risky, but Dallion had grown confident enough to be sure he could protect the small creature should the need arise.

Cool. Ruby gave his usual one-word answers.

Thats what well do, then. And indeed, they did.

The following morning, Dallion went to class with the ruby shardfly on his shoulder. The event quickly brought a crowd, flooding Ruby with attention. All the girls found him adorable, and the boys were envious they didn't have something similar.

Dallion was tempted to have Ruby accidentally injure Phoil, but decided against it. Other than his constant boasting, Phoil hadn't done anything particularly irritating. If anything, Cheska was slowly transforming into the bully of the class. She didn't do it openly, though it was made quite clear that if someone wasn't already in her circle, it was better not to try to get in. The constant talk of what a prodigy she was had clearly gone to her head. Thankfully, she knew where the line was and always made sure not to cross it.

Interestingly enough, there was no sign of the black-haired. Apparently, he had been granted permission not to attend class. Considering what Dallion had to go through to get his own free movement pass, that was beyond impressive.

Class continued with the standard symbol drawing. At this point, everyone had caught on that the best way of training was to do so in their awakening realms. Dallion was pretty sure that his realm was the most developed of all, though most of the rest had their echoes to instruct them.

Every second, a student would flip over the page, having learned the symbol there. As the contents of one booklet were learned, a new one would be given, substantially increasing the difficulty. At that point, the children would slow down.

Cheska was already on her fifth book and judging by the frustration emanating from her had reached her limit. Dallion himself was doing alright with the third booklet. The symbols there were more complex than anything he had learned, though thanks to the method Harp had taught him, creating them was on the whole easier than before.

Want some sparkle in your wings, Ruby? Dallion asked as the shardfly was moving about on his desk.

A double flick of the wings indicated that the insect was willing to go through the experiment.

With a smile, Dallion drew the symbol of light on each of his wings. Within moments, Ruby was shining as bright as a light crystal. The only issue was that the color was incandescent white.

Showing off, Dal? The fury instructor went to his desk. Would have been more impressive if you knew the symbol for color. Using an air current, he erased each of the symbols, returning Ruby to his former state.

Will I find them in the new booklet, sir? Dallion asked.

No. Itll be a while before you get there. Cheskas the only one close to learning that.

Instantly, all eyes focused on the girl. The room resonated with envy, only disrupted by the feeling of overconfident pride coming from Cheska herself.

Ive noticed, however, that youve increased your magic level, the instructor continued. Care to share your secret?

Oh, it just naturally came to me, Dallion replied.

Really? Palag narrows his eyes. How fortunate for you. However, not so fortunate for most of the rest, the fury addressed the rest of the class. All of you have either reached level five or are close. In order to reach rank three, youll need a magic of at least ten. Those that arent will have to remain a rank two novice until they do.

It was clear that the conversation was meant to scare the children enough to push them out of their comfort zone. Thanks to his music skills, Dallion could tell that for the most part, it was working. He also knew that now was the time for the interesting part to come. This had become the pattern of Academy teaching: a problem was presented shortly after a solution was provided. So far, the fury had presented the problem. Now it was time for him to share the means to overcome it.

Starting next week, youll be having magic trials. Think of it as a miniature version of an awakening trial. Youll be taken to a special room in the Learning Hall and given a single task: obtain the magic core there. What the task will be, that depends entirely on chance. It might be a magic maze or a fight against a magical creature. The goal, though, will always remain the same.

When can we take the trials? Cheska immediately asked.

Anytime you wish.

The girl stood up from her seat.

Starting next week, Palag added. Just keep in mind that, unlike awakening trials, these wont consider your current skills. If you dont have what it takes to complete the trial, youll fail.

Whispers filled the room. The fury was likely hoping for this, for otherwise hed have imposed silence as was his practice in the past.

One more small detail. If you fail a trial, you wont be allowed to try again for a week. If you fail three times in succession, youll have to wait a month for another chance. Keep that in mind.

You could have told me about this, Nil, Dallion thought. Would have saved me all that sewer stench.

Id love to have done so, dear boy. However, back when I was at the Academy, such a practice didnt exist. The only way to increase ones magic was through aetherizers, duels, and vortexes.

That must have taken ages.

The process was a bit longer, but we could be assured that only people who knew several hundred symbols and lots of spells got to become an apprentice.

That made sense in a depressing sort of way. Having apprentices who knew all the basics could focus more on assisting their mages and less on learning.

Once the hushed discussions were over, everyone returned to learning symbols. Dallion too pushed himself a bit harder than he was supposed to, completing an entire booklet by lunch. That increased the total number of symbols he knew to over sixty. He was tempted to go on further, but Nil and the rest of his echoes persuaded him to take a break. Reluctantly, Dallion agreed, though only until after lunch. Back in his room, he spent several hours enchanting the plate from the apprentices dining room. The effort rewarded him with reaching the cap on his spellcraft skill. It also gave Dallion an interesting idea. Since he had learned that magic could be bottled, it was possible even likely that it could be combined with other skills.

A new phase of experimentation began. Remembering all the games and animes on magic hed watched back on Earth, Dallions first goal was to create paper charms by combining spellcraft and scholar skills. Thanks to everything he had learned from Harp, that actually worked and was considerably easier than making potions.

The greatest difficulty was the activation mechanism. Drawing a symbol on paper tended to immediately trigger its effects. However, if the symbol wasnt complete, no magic would occur. The solution was to create the symbol within the ink as it was applied on paper, effectively imprisoning it. All that it took to release the spell was to tear or otherwise destroy the paper. That significantly limited the practicality of using charms, though it did earn Dallion the achievement **Paper Mage**, increasing his reaction trait by two points.

Pumped up by his success, Dallion tried combining spellcraft with music, a thought that proved even more difficult than creating potions. The effort was appreciated both by Nil and Harp, but both agreed that maybe Dallion had to master potion-making, before adding magic to songs.

Attempts at combining spellcraft with a few other skills similarly resulted in failure, with one notable exception: attacks. After focusing on it for hours both in his realm and in the real world, Dallion was able to release enough magic through his harpsisword, using it as a conduit, to draw a symbol with the tip of the blade. It was a slow, laboriously intensive process, but it proved to be possible. Once Dallion got the hang of it, hed be able to carve magic symbols into his enemies; which could prove vital when fighting invulnerable opponents. Also, there was the **Magic Swordsman** achievement, increasing his body trait by another two.

Exhausted, Dallion took some rest, both in his realm and in the real world. Then, the following day, the cycle continued. There was a new set of symbols to be learned, followed by another search for vortexes.

Nil insisted that the sewers had to be checked again, in case something had accumulated since the last visit. Dallion had outright refused. He was just considering dropping by the potion lab to check if there were any further shardfly problems when, unexpectedly, he stumbled upon a fairly familiar face.

Heya. He waved, seeing the young dwarf he'd met in the second-hand magic shop.

ey, the dwarf replied, not in the least enthusiastic about the meeting. She was carrying a large wooden bucket full of iron ingots, treating them with such disgust one might consider them garbage.

Need any help with that?

Sure.

The dwarf quickly handed him the bucket. It turned out a lot lighter than Dallion expected. Without a word, she then turned, heading in the direction of her father's store. Amused by her rebellious teenage mentality, Dallion followed.

What are you forging? he asked, in an attempt to make conversation.

Me? Nothing. Dad wants this to patch up the floor. She sighed deeply.

You sure? Its high-quality stuff. I can make lots of things using it.

O? Then you can pay off your debt? The casual way in which the dwarf addressed it, suggested that it was a frequent topic of conversation.

Right, Dallion thought. He had forgotten about that, mostly because the store owner was a friend of Adzorg, and a lot nicer than the general in Nerosal. Ironically, that only proved the general's point: if someone wasn't a cheating asshole, they were a lot more likely to get ignored.

Sure, no worries, Dallion replied. Ill make a sword or two.

Arriving at the shop, though, made him reconsider. Forging items was not an issue for someone who could shape metal like clay. Rather, there was a very different task that the older dwarf was in need of, and Dallion wasn't in a position to refuse.

Chapter 677: Seven Level Sphere Item

It had been so long since Dallion had been hired to clear an item that it almost felt unnatural. Back then, Dallion had just become an Icepicker guild member, and it had been his job to clear sphere items as quickly as possible. Life had been nice, full of taunts, jokes, and lots of feasting. Sadly, the same period also marked the start of his involvement with the general.

Its an unusual item, he said, looking at what he could only describe as a corkscrew dagger. And youre sure that clearing it would cover what I owe you.

Fulfill its destiny and your debt is gone. The dwarf nodded. Ill also add a useful trinket to the mix.

My debt and an item? Dallion did his best to appear astonished.

He was fully aware that he was getting less than he should have. Not that it was about the money. Being a novice was an outright weird experience: he was granted access to artifacts that cost small fortunes, and yet at the same time, there was no way for him to earn or spend money. It was all a sophisticated barter economy in which items, favors, and support were constantly traded.

Of course. You're a friend, after all, and a unter.

Yeah, and a hunter. Dallion smiled. Well, no point in keeping you waiting. Dallion grabbed hold of the dagger.

SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING

Dallion found himself in a small, dark, oval-shaped chamber.

The DAGGER is Level 0 of 7

You are at the START of the DAGGERS first level.

Unseal all levels to fulfill the DAGGERS destiny.

Memories flooded in as Dallion looked at the blue rectangles, taking him back to simpler times. The moment quickly vanished as he summoned his harpsisword.

Lux, he said calmly.

The firebird emerged, bringing light to the chamber. A single archway was visible, leading into a corridor. Dallion focused on using his magic layer vision. To his surprise, there was nothing remotely magical in the item. Furthermore, he wasn't able to see any creature's emotions either.

That was a welcome change. In the past, blocker creatures usually filled the space areas between levels.

Sense any cracklings, Nox?

No, the puma replied with a yawn. Ill take a nap.

Okay, Ill wake you if I need you.

The corridor was closer to a cave, if it weren't for the fact that it was made entirely of iron. Anyone with high forging skills would be able to tell that the material was top quality. That inevitably posed the question, what would the other levels be? As easy as it was to assume that the entire realm would be nothing more than a winding corridor of metal, that would be naive.

Seven levels. Dallion split into a dozen instances. Seven Moons?

As he had learned, with artifacts, everything was possible. Taking full advantage of his combat splitting, he had several instances charged forward at full speed. The first several hundred feet, nothing alarming happened. After that, the artifact bared its teeth.

SPHERE CREATURE

Species: AIRBUG

Health: 100%

Traits:

- **BODY 30**
- **MIND 10**
- **REACTION 20**
- **PERCEPTION 20**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**
- **AIR SHELL (Species Unique)**
- **AIR SLICE (Species Unique)**

Hundreds of insects covered the walls, each the size of a pumpkin. It was quite sneaky of them to leave the first three hundred feet bare, luring awakened in a false sense of security. However, such tricks worked only on low double digit explorers.

Without a moments hesitation, Dallion thrust his sword forward, performing a point attack.

COMBAT INITIATED

A red rectangle emerged, along with the sound of crunching and screeching. This time it had been Dallion who had made the first blow and killed quite a number of insects in the process.

Youve seen my skills, Dallion shouted, moving forward in ten instances. Let me clear the dagger and I wont have to fight you.

I doubt that would work, dear boy. There isnt any upside to them. If you clear the artifact, everything within it dies.

The sound of scurrying legs further down proved the echos point. It seemed that even a hint of music wasnt enough to persuade the creatures.

A swarm of beetles rushed along the sides of the tunnel. Then, twenty feet from Dallion, they merged, forming one bulky specimen blocking the entire passage.

Id forgotten that trick, Dallion said, doing another point attack.

The giant creature burst, like a balloon. Behind it, hundreds of other creatures suffered the same fate, allowing Dallion to keep walking forward without an issue. It was a lot easier freely using point attacks. According to everything hed been taught, this was the wrong approach to clear an item. Explorers had to be cautious, keeping their strong skills secret, so as to provide as little information as possible to the item guardians. Right now, Dallion didnt care, having shown both his powerful attacks and combat splitting. As far as he was concerned, he had to clear the item in one go and as quickly as possible.

By the time he reached the first guardians arena, three more waves of airbugs had attempted to take him on, with as little success as the first two. Dallion didnt even feel tired, summoning his armadil shield for what could be the first series battle so far.

Youre aware that the guardian might be anything? Nil asked. From a feral beast to someone from an imprisoned race.

That would definitely be a change, although Dallion preferred if it were a beast. Facing a person wasnt something he wanted right now. The universe must have read his thoughts, for the ceiling of the arena dripped down, creating none other than a copyette.

Just great, Dallion said beneath his breath. And just when he was hoping not to have to deal with anything magic related.

Threads of magic crisscrossed the slime as it changed form, first turning into a nymph warrior, then a copy of Dallion. The imitation was so perfect that anyone looking wouldnt be able to tell the difference; anyone who wasnt able to see magic, that is. The copyettes magic tended to be a lot brighter than what Dallion currently had.

Dont you have a lot of skills? the copyette asked, its voice slightly off.

Ive been practicing. Dallion filled his words with fear and panic.

Music, already? The other countered the attack with a sound bouquet of his own. I like your initiative.

A second copy of Dallion emerged from the copyette, moving to the side. Two more followed, moving to the side of the chamber in an attempt to flank Dallion.

COMBAT INITIATED

A flying knife split the air, aimed at Dallions head.

Quickly choosing another of his instances to become reality, Dallion then spun around, performing a three-sixty line attack.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Red messages stacked up in the air, but nothing to mark the end of the fight. All four enemy Dallions liquified, pouring onto the ground. Within moments, they were replaced by half a dozen more, two of which charged at him with a combination of slashes and piercing strikes.

They cant perform line attacks? Dallion wondered.

Up till now, copyettes had always been extremely difficult opponents he could barely take on in an unrestricted one-to-one fight. Of course, that was over fifty levels ago. Dallion wasnt the nave rookie he had been at the time, not to mention his traits had increased considerably.

The elements of fear within him melted away, allowing him to go on the offensive, combining multiple skills. Instances systematically attacked the copyettes creations one after the other, while at the same time using the shield to protect himself.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 5%

Hundreds of needles flew out of an enemy Dallion. A few buried themselves within Dallions right leg. The pain was sharp, though momentary. Luxs flames quickly melted the spike away, then proceeded to heal Dallion back to full health.

Magic? the copyette asked, retreating away. Nice familiar you have there.

I know. I wont lend him to you, if thats what youre asking.

In response, the copyette performed its first spell since the start of the fight. Dallion could see the magic threads move, creating symbols. However, instead of drawing them in the air, as most would, the guardian was using his slime to draw them within him. The purple outlines were too bright, even an opaque body, to hide what was going on. Unfortunately, that also meant there was no way to disrupt the spell.

Dallion quickly infused his sword with spark, but it was already too late. The spell was complete, ripping through the Dallion it had been created in, bursting like a supernova.

Shield! Dallion shouted.

The armadil shield was already ahead of him, expanding to form a metal sphere around his owner. The sturdy cocoon weathered the blast, being thrust into the wall in the process. If it wasnt for Lux who prevented Dallion from slapping into the inside of the sphere, hed be in a lot worse condition, not to mention with possibly one dislocated shoulder.

Nil, what the heck am I fighting? Dallion shouted as he split into fifty instances. Forty of those instances ordered the armadil shield to contract to its normal size, then charged at the nearest of his copies.

A large number of copyettes can cast spells, Nil said, as if it were normal. Youre doing quite well, though. Keeping him at a disadvantage and all that.

That wasnt remotely adequate. While the damage received was minimal, Dallion still had to pace himself to a certain degree. This was just the first guardian, after all. There would be six more before the item was fully cleared.

Dozens of thoughts went through Dallions head as he switched between instances, slashing copies of himself as he did.

Nox, some help here! he shouted, as another spell formed in one of the copyette fragments.

This time Dallion tried to avoid it by having Lux fly him as far away from the source of the spell as possible. That turned out pointless. The new spell was a flash, temporarily blinding all of his instances. Thanks to the level of his perception trait, Dallion still could easily move about and defend himself, though he could no longer see his opponent casting spells, and that was a problem. As a result, he did the only thing he could considering the circumstances: enter in a frenzy, doing dozens of line attacks in all directions.

Seconds past. The sound of destruction was everywhere. Large chunks of the ceiling fell to the ground, hitting some of Dallions instances. That didnt stop him. He kept on attacking left and right until his vision slowly started to return.

Damn it! he hissed, trying to find the copyette among the blurred image of his surroundings.

One could call this an amateur move. All the instances and not once had Dallion made sure to look in a different direction. In a way, this might have turned out to be a blessing in disguise. There was no way hed forget such a strategy now. In the future, hed treat every fight, every splitting even, as if the enemy had the ability to cast mass spells.

Nox, where are you? he asked.

From what he could see, there were three fragments of the copyette remaining. Not willing to let them cast another spell, Dallion did another line attack. A whole section of the wall was torn off, along with the copyettes in question. Red rectangles emerged, confirming that hed hit his target, and yet the guardian was far from defeated. Somehow, the annoying creature was keeping part of itself hidden, fighting only with its expendable.

Illusions, Dallion thought. If Gleam were here, shed have seen through it immediately. It was quite possible that she could have brought him victory single-handedly. Instead, he was having trouble at the very first stage of the sphere item, having to resort to extreme lengths to obtain victory. If the fight continued the way it did, hed definitely be too exhausted to reach the end.

If that were to happen, hed have to enter the realm of the dagger at a later point. Yet should that happen, the guardians would be that much stronger.

Chapter 678: Soul Suckers

Three circles of symbols merged together within another fragment of the copyette, this time causing a grid of spikes to shoot up from the floor all the way up to the ceiling. In a fraction of a second, everything in the chamber, debris included, was pinned to the top. Thankfully, there was one exception; using combat splitting, Dallion had managed to shift to the instance that was closest to the chamber entrance and leap out before being caught in the guardians trap.

The copyettes tactic was obvious: take advantage of its fluid nature and use piercing attacks and bars to hurt and hinder its opponent. The way to counter it was by shattering the stone spears to open up enough space, then find and finish off the remnants of the guardian. So far, Dallion had done well over fifty percent damage, possibly ninety. The issue was that the copyette was hiding its info rectangle somehow. That, combined with the fact that it could do magic, always raised the question whether it was healing itself or not.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

Red rectangles suddenly appeared.

Nox, Dallion thought. Good work, buddy.

Tapping the blade of his harpsisword in his leg, he made a series of slash attacks, slicing through the thicket of stone spears as if they were twigs. Chunks of stone fell to the floor. Moving back into the

arena, Dallion used his magic layer vision to find his enemy. Before he could, two more red rectangles popped up, followed by a blue one.

DAGGER Level 1 has been cleared!

Continue on to fulfill the DAGGERS destiny!

The arena and all level one sections of the realm lit up. A large metal gate formed on the side of the arena, then opened, revealing the path further into the items realm.

If you had more rust, you'd leave a trail while you walk, the armadil shield commented. Whats up with that? In the past, you'd dance your way through a level one guardian.

I wasn't expecting him to use magic, Dallion replied, even if he knew that the dryad was right. The copyette shouldn't have been such a big problem. He'd faced such creatures several times before when he was way less experienced than now.

Closing his eyes, Dallion mentally went back through the battle. There were several stupid mistakes he'd made, though none of them major in the overall scheme of things. His use of skills wasn't rusty; he had combined more of them than he'd in the past. The execution was mostly spot on. The issue was one and one alone: the use of magic. In the past, Dallion didn't have to deal with that; not remotely to the extent he was now. Even when facing Aspanan otherworlder prodigy who almost took over the world, he hadn't experienced even a fraction of what he had right now.

Now that I have the trait, I'm no longer protected, Dallion said to himself.

I'm glad you've come to the realization on your own, dear boy. Nil sounded remarkably happy. Not that it was difficult.

The way he cast spells was different.

All races have different ways of casting spells. They do what's most suitable for their race. There's no right or wrong about it. Some races have certain advantages, though at a certain point it all boils down to strategy and planning.

From Dallion's experience, whenever someone said that, it meant that they were the ones at a disadvantage. He'd just seen how efficient copyettes were at casting spells. To top it all, they didn't have to worry about getting hurt in the process. They could use themselves to create as many puppets as they wished, each of them a self-contained single use spell. Nymphs and furies were also much better, possibly because they were naturally born creatures.

Vihrogon, how do dryads cast spells? Dallion asked.

That's quite a direct question, the guardian replied.

Is it sensitive?

No, I'm just toying with you, the armadil shield laughed. Vines. We use vines. The magic spreads through them, so all we have to do is let it blossom into symbols. It's similar to the copyettes, just on the outside.

That was interesting to know. It also suggested that theyd be a lot more difficult to face.

How come there werent any mages in the sword worlds?

Oh, there were initially, just not many. The Star convinced our emperor that they were needed on the battlefield. They were supposed to be the tip of the spear, crushing everything in their way.

The tone suggested that it wasnt what had happened.

What went wrong?

Many, many things. The mages were the first thing we lost. We were all so pumped up that we didnt think much of it. Just the inevitable casualties accompanying a world invasion. The Star said that while we lost our mages, so did the rest. It seemed like a good exchange at the time, so we pushed on.

Quite the nice trick. Mages were the greatest threat the Star had, so eliminating them on all sides was to his benefit or her benefit, depending on who the Star was at the time.

That led Dallion to the realization that so far he hadnt faced any actual mages intending to kill him. Gassil was an exception, but even he was limited, not to mention that Dallion wasnt alone at the time. Apparently, mages avoided conflicts with non-mages unless provoked. Dallion had no idea whether there was some Moon law he wasnt aware of, or the mages had come to some unorthodox understanding, but what he did know was that hed need to up his game.

Nil, what are the chances that I come across more mage guardians?

Same as before, the old echo replied. It all depends on the item. Its a lot more common to find them in magic items, although I use the word common broadly. That said, guardians are certain to cast spells when fighting you.

Why didnt they before?

Even banished as an item, its not a good idea to annoy the Moons. In theory the only thing stopping awakened using their powers on non-awakened is the fear of consequences. It does happen, though everyone proceeds at their own risk. Its the same as magic. Many from the banished races can use it, and now that you have magic, they will if only for the reason that they can get away with it.

Charming. Dallion grumbled.

Why do you think my original didnt participate in item exploration back in Nerosal?

So, youre telling me that being a mage isnt what it was hyped up to be?

Nonsense! Mages have the potential to shape multiple realities! Not being able to improve items is just a minor inconvenience. We can pay others to do it for us.

Dallion didnt feel like responding. Having magic meant hed face a difficulty bump, but that wasnt all badit provided experience and an option to learn just when he had become complacent with his skills. Putting in the effort was going to boost his growth, making him exponentially stronger; strong enough to eventually complete his awakening trials, and maybe even face Harp.

Not pausing to rest, Dallion continued along the next tunnel. As before, this one was completely dark, although significantly wider. A few bubbles of emotions were visible here and there, moving about in the darkness. All of them were quick to run away before Dallion got to see the creatures they belonged to.

A few hundred steps later, the corridor split in two.

Fun, Dallion whispered, looking at both branches. Two corridors on level two of the artifact meant that it followed the inverse pyramid structure each next level was going to be larger than the previous one.

Bursting into instances, Dallion rushed down both of the corridors. Both of them seemed similar. There were no obvious traps, nor large numbers of creatures. After three seconds, it was time for Dallion to make a choice and he did, switching to the instance in the right tunnel. Barely half a minute later, the corridor split into two again.

Nox, Dallion said. What do you think?

Nothing interesting, the crackling responded. Just insects.

Want to take the right one? Ill go left this time.

The puma emerged, leaping out of Dallion onto the floor. Nox had grown a lot since Dallion had first found him. A bit more and the familiar would reach his chest.

After a stretch and a dramatic yawn, the crackling slowly made its way to its section of the tunnel. If there was any enthusiasm, it was well hidden. There was a time when he'd climb all over Dallion in an effort to play. Now he was acting all grown up to the point that he refused being petted.

Let me know what you find, okay?

Nox waved his tail, annoyed.

Good hunting, buddy.

Do well, big bro! Lux chirped. You can do it!

The overwhelmingly cheerful encouragement from the firebird caused Nox to quickly rush into the tunnel, probably still embarrassed by the whole thing. A few moments later, Dallion rushed into the left tunnel as well.

It was alarming that there still weren't any creatures. Likely, they had seen what he was capable of and were avoiding direct confrontation. That meant that they'd rely on ambushes and other forms of trickery.

Harp, can you tell illusions and reality apart? Dallion asked. The harpsisword didn't answer.

Tapping the weapon in his foot, Dallion slid it along the side of the wall. The blade went through the stone, as if it were wax. If the illusion was strong enough, that wouldn't be enough to shatter it, but rather what Dallion was aiming to do was to cause the creatures nearby, if there were any, to react. Within moments, he got his wish.

COMBAT INITIATED

Hundreds of blobs of eagerness came approaching from the end of the corridor. Whatever was approaching it was intent on fighting him. Dallion could hear the sound of wings, although they werent flapping, not in the normal sense of the word.

Oh, crap. Dallion instantly did a point attack. Hed recognized what was approaching and a single point attack wasnt enough to stop the avalanche that was to follow.

SPHERE CREATURE

Species: SOUL SUCKER

Class: CRIPPLED STAR

Health: 100% HP

Traits:

- **BODY 10**
- **MIND 10**
- **REACTION 40**
- **PERCEPTION 20**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **FLIGHT (Species Unique)**
- **PIERCING STRIKE (Species Unique)**
- **HEALTH DRAIN (Species Unique)**

Weak spot: NECK

It had been centuries since Dallion had fought one of those creatures and it was still not long enough. While weak in isolation, the soul suckers were terrifying in large groups. Unlike most creatures, they rarely merged together to gain size, preferring to weapon and kill their enemies through a thousand cuts in this case through a thousand stabs.

The Star that had created them knew exactly what he was doing. They werent meant to defeat people outright, but rather to set them up to be defeated by something stronger.

Ill cocoon you, the armadil shield said, expanding on Dallions arm.

No! Dallion pulled back. Ill deal with this on my own.

You sure?

Soul suckers kept on flying towards him, trickling along the sides of the walls so they couldnt be affected by point attacks.

Its all about the strategy, Dallion replied. Nox, how are things on your end?

Boring, the crackling replied. Crushing insects is no fun.

Well, look on the bright side. Maybe you'll gain another level from this.

If there was anything that would cheer the familiar up, this was it. Meanwhile, Dallion focused on his own fight. The mosquito-like insects were going to be upon him in a matter of seconds. Their approach seemed outright slow thanks to his high reaction trait. Dallion could easily dash from side to side, effectively killing them off. However, observing them through his layer vision gave him another idea.

Chapter 679: Corpse Duel

Drawing runes on a soul sucker turned out to be a difficult and highly inefficient task. Dallion had to spend a lot of attention not to kill the creature outright with the tip of his harpsword. Drawing a series of runes on the tunnel walls, on the other hand, was another matter entirely. It would have been a lot more spectacular if he could cast a spell similar to what the copyette had done. What he couldn't achieve in skill, he made up with in quantity, drawing hundreds of heat runes everywhere. From Cheskas like scene in the dimming room, he'd learned that changing the temperature of large surfaces was quite efficient. In this case, it forced the creatures back to the center of the corridor, where they were an easier target. It was tempting to use just another point attack and kill off as many as possible, yet it was just as efficient just to slice them up with normal strikes. Multi attacks were particularly efficient, since there were many creatures grouped together.

Fighting changed into shifting between slashing enemies and writing symbols on the wall. It wasn't particularly exciting, but at the same time helped Dallion improve. After five minutes, he had become so adept at combining magic with attack that he started drawing other symbols just for the sake of it. The best part he didn't seem tired in the least.

The soul suckers changed from a flow to a trickle, then stopped coming altogether. Dallion rushed forward in a few instances, just to make sure. Then, seeing no enemies, went back to calm walking. He was expecting the corridor to split in two again, but it merged with another corridor instead. There was one path leading forward and one other path that emerged behind.

After a moment's thought, Dallion continued forward. No creature attacked him as he walked, none even appeared until he reached another merging point. The annoying thing was that Dallion recognized the place it was the section where the corridor split into two for the first time. Somehow, Dallion had gone full circle, ending up back to the start.

Nox, what do you see? Dallion asked.

Nothing and insects, the crackling replied.

Any new corridor splits? Or mergings?

Just one long corridor.

Lux, boost me, Dallion said, spun around heading to the left part of the split. And keep going left.

The firebird chirped, then propelled him forward like a cork through a tube. Within seconds Dallion reached the next corridor, split, continuing along the side. This felt like the long, monotonous section that Nox had described. And just like there, this one was also full of soul suckers.

Shield, grow! Dallion raised the shield in front of him.

The armadil shield did, just in time to have several dozen insects splat into it.

I must say, thats a novel way of fighting, dear boy, Nil commented, amused.

Stick around, Nil. You havent seen anything yet.

The further Dallion went, the more insects splatted into his shield. The frequency increased to such an extent that it sounded as if Dallion was walking under the rain with an umbrella.

Suddenly, Lux abruptly stopped, almost causing Dallion to splat on the other side of the shield.

Big bro! the firebird chirped.

Surely enough, Nox was there a few steps ahead. The crackling puma completely ignored Lux and Dallion, leaping along the wall past them in order to be able to fight the soul suckers that Dallion had flown past. The savage enjoyment with which he did so brought back memories of when he was a kitten. The size of the insects might have grown considerably, but so had Nox.

Need any help? Dallion asked, the armadil shield shrinking to its normal size.

One annoyed wag of the tail indicated that Nox felt perfectly capable of doing it on his own.

Wheres the arena, though? Dallion wondered. He didnt remember seeing any doorway or corridor split on the way here. If Nox had come across one, he would have said so.

Nil, is there some puzzle to reveal the arena? he asked. That had been the case in a rather large twenty-level sphere item. Compared to this, that realm was enormous, and it also was the place where Arthurows had attempted to transform several Icepicker explorers into chainlings.

Indeed, that appears to be the case. Based on what Ive seen so far, it might be a simple matter of defeating all blocker insects and

Nox, challenge the guardian, Dallion ordered.

A loud bang echoed as the corridor was suddenly filled with warm orange light.

COMBAT INITIATED

A fraction of a second before the rectangle popped up, Dallion recognized the large form of a firebird in the corridor. It was rather large, partially squished by the confines of the walls. The challenge ability of Nox had worked rather too well.

Splitting into instances, Dallion dashed along the wall as fast as his legs would take him. Letting go of the harpsisword, he went straight for the guardians head, reaching to grab its eye.

Either the firebird was caught completely off guard, or Dallions speed was greater than expected, for not only did he succeed, but he also put an end to the fight with a single action.

DAGGER Level 2 has been cleared!

Continue on to fulfill the DAGGERS destiny!

SNATCH AND GRAB

(+2 Body)

Thats one way to defeat a guardian. Just be careful who you summon to a fight.

The achievement was a rather nice bonus, but it paled in comparison to the insight Dallion had just gained. Up to now, hed kept searching for the guardian arena in order to fight them. The realization that Nox had the ability to call the guardians to him meant that he could turn the whole thing on its head.

A gate emerged on the nearby section of wall, slowly opening as the corridor lit up.

This wasnt how he expected it to happen. Given enough time, hed probably have found the way to the guardians chamber where the fight would have taken place. Relying on Noxs ability sped things up a bit.

I could have taken him,

the puma growled as it passed by Dallion.

I know. Dallion reached to pet the familiar on the head. Instantly, the crackling pulled away. Maybe youll get the next one.

There was another growl, though softer than before.

Dallion summoned his harpsisword and went onto the next level. His theory regarding the realms nature proved to be correct. The chamber he found himself in was twice larger than the previous starting point and had three openingsone in each cardinal direction, along with the entrance. Combat splitting didnt provide many clues, so Dallion decided to try his luck again.

Okay, Nox, have a go.

The puma tensed for a moment. Dallion stood back, waiting for the next creature to appear. Then nothing happened. It was more puzzling than anticlimactic.

Nox? You okay there, buddy?

The snarl indicated that it wasnt.

Stay close by, Dallion whispered, heading towards the exit in front of him.

Want me to fly you through, boss? The firebird offered.

Lux, move off me.

Confused, the flames moved off Dallion, transforming into a large cyan firebird. It was by far smaller than the one Dallion had thought, though still rather impressive.

Ill lead. You guys follow. He kept on walking.

The corridor continued for about a hundred feet, at which point it reached a juncture. Three options were available for Dallion to choose from. Just as before, he went forward. The principle of the realm was starting to become clear: each level section came with its own mazea number of corridors equal to the level crisscrossing and connecting to obfuscate the way to the final chamber. Quite clever in more ways than one: each maze would become more complicated while mentally discouraging all those trying to clear the artifact. Fighting along one corridor was easy, finding the guardian in a network of two corridors less so. At the final section, there would be dozens of

corridors with hundreds of connections, splits, and mergings. Dallion wasn't intimidated by that. He had participated in maze puzzles back in school. What troubled him was the complete lack of creatures at present.

Nox. He glanced over his shoulder. You sure you're not sensing anything?

Nothing in this section, the familiar replied.

Well Dallion drew a light rune on the wall. The metal the tunnel was composed of lit up for a while, then quickly faded away. Looks like we'll be dealing with a Shelby.

Of all the guardians, Dallion disliked those the most. They weren't strong or even difficult to defeat. Most item explorers preferred them since it means one less fight. However, they were also an indication that the Star had set his claws here. Just because Arthurows was no more didn't mean that all the cracklings in the world had vanished along with him.

Look out for tentacles. Dallion split into fifty instances.

The walk through the mini-maze of tunnels took a while. Thanks to his high mind trait, Dallion was able to remember the path he'd taken, making a mental map of the area. It didn't take long for him to figure out where the chamber of the guardian would be.

There were no mess-ups this time. After three turns, Dallion reached a large oval room. One of his instances dashed and rolled inside, ready for some response. However, all that he found was the skeleton of an icicorn. The bone structure was unmistakable, and the chill still emanating from the remains along with the threads of magic made it apparent who the original guardian had been.

Where's the Shelby? Dallion asked.

That's a rather good question. Nil sounded puzzled. Sadly, I can't give you an answer.

Was it my magic?

Dont flatter yourself. Your magic is still insignificant. It would take a lot more to affect Star-spawn, especially if it's been hiding in an item. It is, in theory, possible that the magic of the Academy had something to do with it. Or it could be a wild coincidence, like a vortex appearing within the item, destroying the creature, then gradually evaporating.

The explanation sounded rather implausible.

Okay, in that case, why isn't the level clear?

I assume you still have to defeat something.

That was the second time something weird had happened. First, the door to the guardian chamber had been missing, and now there was no guardian to face. It was almost as if something had bugged the Moon laws. Of course, that was supposed to be impossible. The Moons were considered infallible, and from what Dallion had seen, when it came to certain aspects they were.

Can it be my curse?

Seriously, dear boy, the world doesn't revolve around you. Maybe your leave gets to a hundred and sixty you would, but until then you're just another high level awakened one among thousands.

Nox, search the rest of the corridors, Dallion ordered.

The puma transformed into ten cubs, which ran back out of the chamber. Dallion then went to the bone remains. And bent down.

What are you thinking? Nil asked.

If this is where I end, I can at least get a little something for my troubles.

The magic running through the icicorner bones was quite strong, befitting a magical creature. With a steady hand, Dallion reached out, almost touching the edge of one. The magic within him extended through the tips of his fingers, allowing him to grab hold. Grabbing hold of the thread, he then pulled.

Extracting magic from supernatural bones wasn't something described in any of the Academy books he had read. Through trial and error, and also the use of his zoology skills, Dallion was able to finally pull the thread out completely. The moment he did, the bone quickly turned to ash, fading away from existence.

Holding a ball of pure magic, Dallion repeated the process, going through all other remnants. The ball remained the same size, though it grew in intensity until it was almost white. Finally, there was one part left: the skull with the creature's horn. Dallion had chosen to keep it for last, purely for sentimental reasons. When it came to it, though, he found that stealing the magic, even from a dead unicorn's horn, was a rather challenging feat. The magic thread was temperamental, actively struggling against the effort. It was like trying to draw out a rather energetic worm from the ground. Time and time again Dallion was on the verge of obtaining it, when it would snap, forcing him to restart the process.

There's nothing left on the level. Nox returned in puma form. Or the previous ones.

Thanks, Nox, Dallion whispered, focusing on his latest attempt. He was close again. Just a little bit more and

Suddenly the thread let go of the horn, jumping right into Dallion's hand. The magic didn't stop there, moving through Dallion's fingers and into his body. That wasn't all. The ball of magic he was holding in his other hand, also did the same, rushing into him like an electric current.

You have assimilated the ICICORNER's magic, increasing your magic trait to 9.

Dallion instinctively pulled back, fighting against the burning sensation spreading along his veins.

DUEL MASTER

(+2 Reaction)

You have won your first duel, even if it's against a dead opponent. A win is a win, but don't think you'd be as lucky when dueling the living.

Chapter 680: Nymph's Envy

DAGGER Level 3 has been cleared!

Continue on to fulfill the DAGGERS destiny!

A gate emerged, marking the path to the next section.

Good one, Dallion thought.

Winning a duel against a corpse wasn't something he'd brag about, but the achievement points were more than welcome, as was increasing his magic to nine. A bit more luck and he'd be able to reach the coveted magic ten in this very artifact. That was supposed to be good news, but Dallion couldn't shake the feeling that something didn't feel right.

Three down, four to go, Nil said, trying to be encouraging. You're almost halfway there.

Halfway there, Dallion repeated, then passed through the gate to the next section.

As predicted, there were four doorways to choose from, each leading in a different direction. There was nothing stopping Dallion from going through the motions and fight his way to the guardian, but he decided to take advantage of Nox's ability and have the battle here instead.

This time, the level guardian emerged, filling the space. Thankfully, it was a feral creature: a rather large blade spider. There was a time when the size and nature of the creature would have intimidated Dallion. No longer, though. Leaning against the wall, he let Nox handle it. The crackling was only too happy, finally getting a chance to sharpen its claws.

The fight was swift and brutal. Nox would shift between fighting in puma form or as a pack of cublings, clawing at the spider's blade legs until one was torn off. In the process, though, five of the cublings were killed off, reducing Nox's overall health by ten percent each time.

On several occasions, Dal considered stepping in, but July warned him not to. This was the first time the echo had spoken to him on his own accord since the death of Gleama positive step, though still a small one.

DAGGER Level 4 has been cleared!

Continue on to fulfill the DAGGERS destiny!

The familiar rectangle popped up, right after Nox had managed to slaw through the guardian's shell, defeating it. Not an easy victory by any means, but the creature seemed content to the point that it brushed into Dallion's leg passing by.

Way to go, buddy. Dallion smiled. Ill handle the next one.

Without protest, the puma leaped off the floor, vanishing midair. Moments later, the Nox dagger emerged in Dallion's belt. From here on, he was going to chiefly rely on the weapon rather than the familiar for fighting.

For half a minute Dallion stood there, hoping that the gate to the next section would emerge. When it didn't, he headed towards the right most corridor.

The section being lit up made a whole world of difference. For starters, it was a lot more pleasant, making the corridors aesthetically pleasing. The material had changed from common metal to sky silver alloy, suggesting that beneath the crude surface the artifact was hiding a treasure. Likely that was the reason that the dwarf wanted it cleared off the books so to speak. Either way, that wasn't

Dallions concern. He was merely hired to get the job done. What happened afterwards was not his concern.

It took half a day to go through the maze of tunnels. Thankfully, defeating the guardian had also put an end to the creatures within the section. Upon reaching the next starting point, Dallion decided to use the same strategy, having Nox summon his enemy.

The fifth guardian of the Dagger was another feral: a shield turtle, of all things. Fighting it was a lot easier than any of the previous guardians, making Dallion wonder whether the order hadnt been reversed. There was no rule stating that guardian strength was based on order of appearance, but he had come to expect it. It was more alarming that the difference between feral and banished guardians seemed so vast. Back when Dallions awakening level was in its twenties, it had been barely noticeable. The fact that it now was leading him to the conclusion that the banished had to follow some additional rules of their own.

I was a bit worried after facing the copyette, the armadil shield said. But the way things are going, this could be the easiest clearing yet.

Dont jinx it, Dallion said, but he was thinking the same. Only two guardians were left, and he wasnt remotely as tired as he feared he might be. At this point, he could even afford to go all out with point attacks again.

When Nox challenged the sixth guardian, though, one thing became obviousthe armadil shield had indeed jinxed it.

DAGGER LEVEL 6 GUARDIAN

Species: NYMPH

Class: SHADOW

Health: 70%

Traits:

- BODY 50

- MIND 40

- REACTION 20

- PERCEPTION 20

- MAGIC 40

Skills:

- ATTACK

- GUARD

- ACROBATICS

- ATHLETICS

- FORGING

- **MUSIC**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **WIND SLASH (Species Unique)**
- **SOUND ENTANGLE (Species Unique)**
- **WATER FORM (Species Unique)**

Weakness: NONE

A nymph with fifty magic? Dallion stared at his opponent.

On the surface, he seemed like a lanky youth with a set of full plate nymph armor that was three times his size. The magic within him was exceptionally bright, not to mention it spread into every piece of his armor, which was made of metal.

Hey, the guardian said. I knew sooner or later you'd get here.

It took some time to cross your mazes, Dallion replied, summoning his weapon.

Not talking to you. The guardian looked down. I'm talking to her. He pointed at the harpsisword.

This was the third time that Dallion had seen such a reaction. First, it was back in the training dagger, then when Onda entered his realm. Now this nymph, as well.

Harp, that conversation that we keep leaving for later, Dallion thought, it would be nice to have it soon.

Dont tell me she's an empress, Dallion said, trying to find weaknesses in his opponent's stance.

No. A blob of sadness became visible in the nymph's chest. But she could have been.

He was about to say more, but Dallion chose not to give him the opportunity, charging forward with a line attack.

The thread of destruction smashed into the nymph's armor, causing droplets of water to fill the chamber and there it stopped, absorbed by the liquid.

COMBAT INITIATED

Dallion pushed on, tapping the side of his harpsisword as he swung at the nymph's neck. Before it could reach its target, the spray droplets throughout the room darted to the nymph, forming a two-handed sword blocking the attack.

Refusing to give up the initiative, Dallion struck several times more. With the blade vibrating he was supposed to be able to cut through stone and steel, yet somehow the blade of water kept on blocking him, as if it were invincible.

You're weak, the guardian said, not bothering to counterattack. A few nice tricks, a bit of potential

Runes appeared on the floor in the wake of the nymph's footsteps. Similar to the Vixenair, he could draw runes with his feet.

Dallion slashed at the ground, using his spark to disrupt the spell. The symbols faded away only to have new ones appear.

Thousands would kill at the opportunity to be trained by her, the nymph continued, taking on Dallion's blows. Hundreds of otherworlders competed for the honor.

Each word was accompanied by a subtle voice attack, trying to establish a link with Dallion's emotional state, then abuse it. The attacks were easy to spot, but represented yet another field which he had to focus on. Music, magic, and physical all were things that could prove fatal in battle. If Dallion wanted to win, he had to take each of those things into account and counter them. So far, he wasn't doing well at all, at least on the surface. He couldn't help but notice that the guardian was casting spells just a bit too slow. No matter how fast his feet moved, the symbols continued to appear at a steady pace, as if he were toying with Dallion.

Well, she's my teacher now, Dallion said, launching a music attack of his own. A few links were established with the cold anger pulsing within the guardian, only to be snapped fractions of a second later.

Pure undeserved luck. Just like the rest of your race. You feed on the remnants of greatness like vultures living off the corpses of time. You'll never amount to anything, so you fight for the rot that's not yours.

Dallion pulled back to do a point attack, when the harp's sword flew out of his hand. Purple light surrounded it, light that he hadn't been able to see in the past. Dozens of interlock spell circles formed as the weapon changed form, turning into the nymph.

That's how you did it, Dallion thought. The transformation had been a magic spell all along. In the past, Dallion just wasn't able to see it. But if that were the case, why was it restricted? And also, did it mean that the armadillo shield was able to use magic as well?

Seeing Harp in her nymph form, the dagger guardian froze still. The symbols on the floor faded as he lowered his weapon.

You've gone too far, she said, sounds emanating from her body with the intensity of a loudspeaker. It isn't your place to decide what happens in the world. Especially not now!

The guardian reached forward, mouth opening to say something. Before he could, a spell circle formed on the floor, moving beneath him. Waves burst up, each causing dozens of red rectangles to stack up. Counting the damage, that single spell had cost well thousands of percent of damage. Not even terminal attacks were this vicious.

DAGGER Level 6 has been cleared!

Continue on to fulfill the DAGGER's destiny!

Dallion stood petrified at what he had just seen. This wasn't the first time he'd faced overwhelming strength. It wasn't the most hopeless situation he had been in, either. If he were at full strength, with all his familiars Gleam being alive and his current combat splitting abilities, he could potentially put up some resistance if no spells were cast.

Harp?

Ignore what he said. The harpsisword turned towards him. Being banished affects people differently. Some work to forget the past, others let it fester, transforming into scyllas. In a few more centuries, hed have become just that.

Who are you, Harp?

Im the guardian of your harpsisword, she replied. It doesnt matter who I was. After the banishment, no one is what they used to be. Emperors, empresses, generals, heroes tens of thousands of them are within items. All of them were something significant before their banishment. Now, were all items.

What about the other part? Dallion wanted to ask.

The whole thing about humanity relying on the past wasnt a new concept. Many people had mentioned it, even the Star. However, there lay the paradox. If humanity was so worthless, how had it risen to a point that it ruled the world? Even the conflict between the empire and the other world powers was essentially a fight between human kingdoms. Or maybe the guardian had been a bit more literal.

Whats this artifact, Harp? he asked. Its more than a sword, isnt it?

Its a sword, just a special type of sword. A weapon designed specifically to fight us and the copyettes.

Like slime bolts?

No, its the opposite. Once you fulfill its destiny, itll be able to train magic at touch.

Holy crap.

Not as extreme as what you experienced when learning potion making, but enough to harm magic races.

A weapon to fight nymphs and copyettes. Only one thought came to mind: someone was trying to do the same that Dallion had back in Nerosal. Aspans secret was out and people were already gearing up to take him on.

Dallion and the nymph kept looking at each other silently, close to a minute, after which Harp returned to her usual form, dropping to the ground.

Nil. Dallion picked up the weapon. Whats the state of Hannahs inn?

The Timepiece is still standing. Its Lanitol thats in trouble. You can ask the dwarf to send a message to my original if you like. Im sure he would.

No. Dallion replied. The fewer people knew, the better. For the moment, he had one decision to make: whether to go forward with clearing the item or stop here.