

## Leveling up 711

### Chapter 711: Aetherizer Revisited

It took half a week for it to become clear that Dallions self-imposed deadline was far too optimistic. While it could be said he was making good progress in some areas, it was obvious he could get nowhere as close as where he wanted in the allocated time. Furthermore, he had abused his fame, adding in a bit of music skills, to learn more about the creatures that Katka had warned about. As it turned out, the beings were very much real. The tome he had managed to get illegally from an apprentice at the novice administration building described them as extra-realm beings that ventured into the world at random. In most cases, they only came and went, but sometimes they would cause chaos or create a home for themselves in the wilderness. It was speculated that some of the non-Star-spawn monsters were, in fact, such creatures that had adapted enough to the world that they lost their ability to leave.

Dallion had skipped through the philosophical reasoning it was exceedingly boring and often conflicted with its own findings and flipped straight to the bestiary section. Everything there ranged from annoying to terrifying. The reality chameleon was there, as well as the platypa the creature that had defeated Dallion in humiliating fashion back when he was an apprentice.

Nil, how strong do you think Ive become?

Not enough to take on a noble, if thats what youre asking, the echo replied. I know Im wasting my breath, but rushing things will only put you at risk, as well as anyone who tries to protect you.

So, I havent improved at all?

*I didnt say that. The fact that your magic trait is eighteen proves that youve improved. As the saying goes, youve acquired a little knowledge, sadly just enough to get yourself into more trouble that you can handle.*

Can I take on an apprentice?

*Thats a difficult one. It depends very much on the apprentice. With your current knowledge, you can probably take on most of the apprentice clerks even without casting spells. However, youll have no chance against an actual assistant mage.*

What about the artifact guardians? Dallion said. The one I started improving.

The question had taken a surprising enough turn, leaving Nil momentarily speechless. It had been so long since Dallion had entered the artifacts realm that one would have thought hed learned his lesson and left it alone. Going back to it wasnt the best of ideas. Then again, it was better than trying his awakening trials again.

You already know you can defeat the first one, Nil said. The second one might cause some trouble, but you have a chance. To be honest, it can still go either way.

And the last?

*That depends on what the final guardian is. Might be something weak, or it might be a full-fledged dragon.*

Come on, Dallion laughed.

*Where do you think the first emperor found his familiar? It wasn't in the wilderness, I can tell you that.*

Okay, so a mini-dragon. Not that made it any better. A dragon with adequate knowledge of magic wasn't something Dallion felt he could win against. Then again, it was definitely something he could face.

*You're thinking about it, aren't you?*

A boy can dream, Nil. Dallion said, then went to the stash of artifacts in his room and grabbed hold of one.

### **SPHERE ITEM AWAKENING**

Reality changed.

**The AETHERIZER is level 1 of 3**

**You are at the START of the AETHERIZER's first level.**

**Unseal all levels to fulfill the AETHERIZER's destiny.**

Two purple rectangles appeared, same as the last time Dallion was here. An octagonal mirror corridor continued forward Dallion's path to the first guardian. Last time, it had taken a lot of energy and spark infused line attacks, not to mention magic projections, to get the creature. This time, Dallion intended to focus solely on spells.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

The red rectangle didn't take long to appear. The guardian remembered their last fight and had taken steps to try and change the outcome. However, Dallion had improved as well.

His fingers flicked through the air, casting the obligatory starting spell for a mage: reaction speed; even with the current values of his trait, being faster was always better. In the world of mages, reaction speed marked the difference between casting one or ten spells for every opponent's one.

### **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

The visenair emerged, biting Dallion's left leg, before disappearing into a mirror on the side of the corridor once more.

Dallion ignored the attack. A five percent reduction was nothing Lux couldn't handle. Instead, he cast a spell to light up all the magic threads around him. The entire space transformed into a vortex cage. However, Dallion wasn't done. Other than his spellcraft abilities, there was one other big advantage he had obtained since his previous visit, and it was time to use it.

Gem, he said. Make the portals visible.

The aetherfish popped into existence on his left shoulder. Quickly it flew to the nearest mirror and cast a spell Dallion was unable to copy. At a later point, he was going to reverse engineer the pattern of symbols so as to be able to duplicate it, but for the moment it was better to have a familiar do it.

Once one mirror was done, the aetherfish moved to the next. Naturally, it didnt do it the way a person would, instead centering the mirror and continuing within the maze of reflections. Yet, for a magic creature, it wasnt a reflection.

Of course, Dallion thought, looking at Gem.

It seemed so simple now. Magical creatures didnt follow the physical laws. For them, what seemed like a maze was nothing but an open plain of connections. And with a bit of training and a lot of focus, Dallion could see the same. His physical body prevented him from doing what Gem could. Yet, looking closely, he was able to see the truth of this place; it wasnt a realm, but rather a multitude of interwoven realms, all shrouded in an illusion.

Beautiful, isnt it, dear boy?, Nil said.

It was. Like being in an origami, Dallion whispered. Or a paradox cube.

## **MINOR WOUND**

**Your health has been reduced by 5%**

Dallion suffered another bite, and yet again, he didnt react. Until the creature kept on attacking physically, he was safe. Only when magic started being wielded would things become tricky.

Postponing his fascination till later, he cast the portal spell hed seen Iksa do, on the mirror and stepped through. Within the realm, it seemed that hed only taken a single step through the mirror. In truth, that was a lot more he had gone crossed into another mini-realm. Splitting into instances, he both continued forward and stepped back into the corridor. The portal opening remained active.

Boss, shes casting a spell! Lux warned.

A few steps away or three realms off, respectively the vixenair was on the verge of completing one of its spells. Remembering the configuration from last time, Dallion knew exactly what would follow.

Gem, get out of here! he shouted, bursting into dozens of instances.

The aetherfish popped out of existence, just as water droplets emerged through multiple realms, all darting towards Dallion.

In theory, it was possible for him to evade them, but there was no point in doing something complex just for the sake of it. Summoning his armadil shield, Dallion dashed in various directions with his instances. Quite a few of them were hit, even heavily wounded by the guardians attack, but over half remained unscathed. Now it was Dallions turn. Rushing forward to the next mirror he directly cast a portal spell. If the logic was the same as it had been so far, he was supposed to end up on the other side and indeed he did.

Its not too late to surrender, Dallion said, infusing his words with doubt. I won last time, and I was better than before.

The music attack worked. The vexinair hesitated for several seconds as Dallion moved from realm to realm. He didnt reach the guardian, sadlythe creature ran off the moment he got near, but this was a lot closer than what Dallion had managed to achieve last time, and without using a single line attack at that.

Symbols appeared in the air, as both sides cast their spells. The guardian was focusing on mass area destructive spells that would injure Dallion enough to kick him out of the realm. Meanwhile, Dallion focused on simultaneously casting two spells: portals and magic barriers. The entire combat changed into a tactical game of tic-tac-toe.

Each time Dallion crossed into a new realm, the area in which the vixenair could venture in got smaller and smaller.

*Magic really is powerful,*

Dallion thought.

Especially against magic and magical creatures, Nil agreed. Just dont get overconfident. In the real world, magic only succeeds if its stronger than the person its used against.

Considering Dallion had several mage encounters, he should have known that. Right now, though, he ignored the comment, chasing after the guardian.

Athletics, he thought, running on the wall of a realm in order to avoid the spikes of water that spouted from the floor. The vixenair was getting more creative as it struggled to defeat his enemy. Occasionally hed even deal Dallion a bit of damage, only to have it immediately restored by Lux.

Then, the inevitable happened. Despite its active attempts, the guardian was left with no choice but to get trapped in one of the corridor realms. Turning around with a hiss, the creature circled itself. To some, it would seem that the vixenair was chasing its tail, yet any mage could see that was the final casting of an intricate and extremely complicated spell. Heat and air symbols were present in abundance, suggesting it planned to go out literally with a bang.

Crap! Dallion thrust forward.

This was the first time hed summoned his harpsisword in the fight, but right now, he didnt have any choice. There was only one way he knew to stop a spell in progress, and it involved a sharp weapon infused with spark.

A slash split the air, landing on the floor in front of the vixenair. Time seemed to stop. The creature looked down. The tip of the blade had failed to hit its paws, yet that didnt matter. The pattern it had so diligently created had been sliced in two. The spell quickly fizzled away, leaving both face to face.

Give up, Dallion said, splitting into six instances.

Why is it hesitating? He wondered. It was obvious who the winner was. Even if the creature managed to escape the current trap, there was nowhere it could go.

It was completely outclassed, and yet there was a hint of stubbornness coming from it that prevented it from accepting defeat.

**The AETHERIZER Guardian has admitted defeat.**

**Do you accept her surrender?**

Dallion didnt hesitate, hitting the thumbs up rectangle the moment it appeared. Normally, this would mark the disappearance of the vixenair, but since magic was involved, the creature remained where it was, looking at him intensely. Now that the fight was over, and the vixenair had calmed down, it looked rather cute.

Thanks. Dallion reached to pat the creature on its head. To some surprise, the creature let him.

You have a magic companion, the vixenair said, in a high-pitched female voice.

Yes. Yes, I do. Dallion smiled. Was the vixenair offering to join as well?

How?

I have the skills for it.

How did a magic companion agree to join void companions?

From what Nil had explained, magic and void didnt go well together. From this perspective, it made sense that the corresponding creatures wouldnt get along as well.

Ive no idea. They just agreed.

Youre a strange one. Strange and dangerous.

This was yet another time that something out of this world had called Dallion dangerous. The prophecy shared by the dwarf hunter came to mind. Yet that was over wasnt it? Or maybe Dallion had mistaken the event. The destruction of the world wasnt related to the Star, but to something else entirely.

Im not dangerous. Dallion remained calm. Just a unique combination of traits, skills, and companions.

No, youre not.

Chapter 712: The Platypain

**AETHERIZER level 1 has been cleared!**

**Continue to fulfill the AETHERIZERs destiny.**

So far, so good. Dallion had hardly broken a sweat this time. With a bit of effort, he could have gotten things done faster and possibly in a more elegant fashion. However, a win was a win, and he had focused on using spells rather than compensating with standard skills and abilities. It had been enough to moderately impress Nil, but would it be enough for the magic platypus?

Splitting into instances, Dallion continued forward. At every step he looked in all directions expecting the unexpected. If there was a magic symbol, a glowing magic thread, or even a blob of emotion hed have reacted on the instant. Strangely enough, nothing of the sort happened.

Gem, can you see tough illusions? Dallion asked.

Err, no? The aetherfish popped into existence.

That was moderately annoying. There was no doubt that the guardian was present, hiding somewhere among the hundreds of realms that composed the current section of the item. At the end of the day, the guardian didn't have to face Dallion; it was Dallion that had to defeat it to progress forward.

Combining magic with attack, Dallion drew a light symbol on the floor in front of him. Threads lit up beneath the mirrors, stretching like cables, or thin pipes, but still no platypus.

Not in the mood to play? Dallion asked, using his music skills to add arrogance to his words.

Whether or not the guardian could hear, it didn't react.

*Any ideas on this, Nil?*

One or two, the echo said. I still think it's a bit too early for you to tackle the artifact.

*You could have said so earlier.*

*There's still a chance you get lucky.*

Translated to normal speech, Nil was acknowledging that Dallion had grown enough to try and take on the platypain. That was encouraging.

Do I have to start breaking things again? Dallion asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he spun around with his harpsisword, doing a semi-circle strike in the process, then sprinted down the corridor, shattering all the mirrors on his right. Every few steps, an instance of his would peel off, carefully observing which mirror would start getting repaired first. When nothing happened, Dallion turned around, doing another destructive dash. Glass fragments fell to the floor with a nasty crunching sound, and yet the guardian still refused to show itself.

Two out of four, Dallion thought.

The logical choice was to go with the floor. That way, he'd leave the messiest part for last. Then again, using instances eliminated the need to choose. Two rows of instances ran along the corridor again, sliding the vibrating harpsiblade along a different surface.

With each step, it seemed that the guardian wasn't there. Then, at the very last moment, the platypus jumped down from the final mirror segment on the ceiling.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

The red rectangle made it clear that the creature meant business. Not wanting to disappoint, Dallion performed a series of spark-infused line attacks in the platypain's direction.

A series of barriers emerged, stacking around the guardian. Each of Dallion's line attacks was strong enough to smash three barriers at one go, but the more that were destroyed, the more appeared.

When did he cast them? Dallion wondered.

Several of his instances had focused on the guardian every second since it had appeared and hadn't seen any symbols appear. There had been no footprints, no limb movements, not even a change in the platypus fur.

Moments later, another spell materialized, causing sharp quills to emerge out of the creature's body and fly like homing missiles straight at Dallion's head. Thanks to his armadillo shield and combat splitting, the attacks were avoided, though closer than Dallion would have liked.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion missed the time when he'd rely on green markers to tell him where the enemy's attack zone was. Sadly, those only worked on lower-level creatures, not to mention that magic seemed to bypass them completely.

Dallion unsummoned his shield, then moved his right hand with such speed that he created the illusion that four sets of fingers were visible.

Lux, take care of evasion! Dallion ordered.

Blue flames surrounded him, pulling him a few feet away from the platypain.

Gem, can you cast shield barriers?

Err, yes. Barriers are easy, the aetherfish replied.

Do that, Dallion ordered while concentrating on his casting. I'll need five seconds.

For most people, five seconds wasn't too much. When it came to magic, that was an eternity. All the boosts and training could only help so much when casting complicated spells. Back in the Purple Moons realm, it had taken two people in unison to cast the spell fast enough. For Dallion to do it on his own, he needed three times the time.

More quills went flying Dallion's direction, followed by a new set of barriers surrounding the guardian. Lux gracefully moved Dallion throughout the air, careful not to ruin his spell. Meanwhile, Gem created a series of individual small barriers in rapid succession, blocking each individual quill that posed a threat.

The attack didn't stop there. Catching on to Dallion's tactic, the guardian started a complicated spell of its own. Dallion had no idea what the spell was, but experiencing a brief calm during which the platypus remained perfectly still gave him an idea of what might follow. Unsummoning his shield, he cast a portal spell with his left hand.

Lux immediately got the idea, moving Dallion through the portal into another corridor realm. A split second later, the main corridor twisted and collapsed on itself like a straw that had all of its air sucked out.

What the heck?! Dallion shouted. Adding the final symbols to his spell.

What the platypain had done wasn't just a simple attack spell, it was dangerously creative. It was manipulating the environment itself! The only entities Dallion had seen do something similar were Aether, the reality chameleon, and possibly Katka during their last previous fight.

Now, do you understand why I didn't think you were ready? Nil asked. That's one category of spells you haven't trained in.

A series of magic circles collapsed in on themselves, as Dallion completed his own spell. Chains show out of the air, passing through the portal and squeezing through the corridor until they twisted around their target.

The guardian had protected himself by creating a barrier sphere around him, but that didnt dissuade the chains. As if sentient, they wrapped around the sphere, waiting for the moment it would give in. If Dallion knew the exact spell Raven had used to exhaust all magic, he might have resorted to using it. Unfortunately, that was one thing he had failed to learn.

Letting the chains do their thing, Dallion turned around and cast another portal spell. Since there was no way to reach the platypain through the main corridor, he was going to have to jump through the various mini-realms and get to him from the other side.

In his mind, the scholar skills were in full force, forming a mental map of the area for Dallion to follow. Since everything was based on the basic principles of diffraction, one could make a pretty good guess how the realms would be connected.

Youre being reckless again, Nil said.

Yep. Dallion didnt have much choice. Against this enemy, it was a race against time. The aether chains were persistent, but even so, they might snap at any moment.

Youve become stronger. Dallion heard the voice of the guardian in his head.

Does that mean youll surrender? he shouted, rushing forward through the maze of mirrors.

*Only if the outcome is wholly in your favor. For now, it isnt.*

Youre confident about that? Dallion kept on casting portals. According to his mental calculations, he was half the way there. It was almost funny how the trip so far had taken him less than the chain spell. In the future hed have to get a lot faster, which meant he had to double his efforts during Katkas training.

*Youre using mage spells, but theyre borrowed. You arent able to create your own spells.*

Ive created lots of spells on my own.

You arent able to create your own sells, the guardian insisted with cold certainty. Until you do, the greatest advantage of humans will remain out of reach.

The further Dallion went, the more the corridors split. Still, he knew he was on the right track. Just for good measure, he started casting barriers behind him to limit any potential movement his opponent might have.

Please lets not fight in three dimensions, Dallion said to himself.

In the distance, he could see the ball of chains. Neither of the two spells had ended, maintaining the status quo. It was the playpains passiveness that was alarming. The creature was smart, creative, and skillful enough to have thought of something seconds ago.



A matter of steps from his target, Dallion summoned his harpsisword, filled it with spark, then thrust a point attack from point blank range. The raw power of the strike shattered the chains and the sphere beneath it. At that point, several things happened at once.

As the attack continued forward, it cut through another barrier that hadnt been visible before.

## **AETHERIZER LEVEL 2 GUARDIAN**

**Species: PLATYPAIN**

**Class: MAGIC**

**Health: 90%**

**Traits:**

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

**Skills:**

- **ATTACK**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **ILLUSION SHROUD (Species Unique)**
- **FUR ISOLATION (Species Unique)**

**Weakness: UNKNOWN**

The white rectangle emerged, providing the first information regarding the creature Dallion had come across. The good news was that there werent a large amount of unique skills. The bad news was that three of the skills were exceedingly powerful.

The illusion shroud gone, magic symbols shone all over the creatures fur. Most of them Dallion was unfamiliar with. Until the spell took effect.

## **PAIN EFFECT**

**Pain will course through your body for two minutes.**

**Casting speed has been reduced by 50% for two minutes.**

Dallions high perception turned against him. Dallion yelled out in agony as even the experience spent in the wilderness wasnt able to help him completely ignore the pain. His vision blurred. Every muscle in his body rebelled, as if wanting to twist off and hide somewhere far away.

There was no way Dallion could withstand two minutes of that. By all logic he had lost the fight and with it, the attempt to clear the aetherizer. However, there was one thing in hunter training that made Dallion accept the outcome. One thing that Euryale had taught him was that the moment of ones defeat was also the tipping point of a fight as long as one managed to take advantage.

Since Dallions body screamed at him to twitch in an attempt to relieve part of the pain, Dallion let it. Only as he did, he kept on holding the hilt of his weapon.

To the observer, it seemed that he had lost control and was moments away from collapsing to the ground.

Spark! Dallin shouted through the pain.

A bright glow covered the harpsisword as one final line attack was performed.

## **FATAL STRIKE**

### **Dealt damage is increased by 500%**

A glowing line emerged on the platypains fur as the remaining mirrors behind the guardian shattered to dust.

Got you! Dallion said as he crashed on the floor.

All that remained now was for him to withstand the two minutes of pain before moving on to the final guardian. If luck was on his side, maybe he could end this. If not, hed have learned some valuable lessons.

Not quite, the platypus replied.

What?! Focusing every drop of will he had, Dallion looked up.

The creatures outer layer of fun had peeled off like a coat, revealing a second layer beneath. Somewhere buried in the trivia section of Dallions memories, he remembered that the platypus on Earth had two layers of fun to keep it isolated and waterproof. Obviously, this was the case for the platypain, too.

## **Chapter 713: The Magic Detector**

In more cases than not, fatal strikes were enough to defeat any creature. In this case, it was like fighting an egg the outer shell had cracked, leaving the creature itself unharmed. Thankfully, with the information rectangle now visible, it was clear that sixty percent health had vanished along with the outer layer of fur.

A moment was spent in revaluation of the situation. Both sides created new strategies, evaluated them, then spring into action.

Dallion split into a dozen instances, each doing a variety of slash and thrust attacks in an attempt to finish the job. Meanwhile, the platypain also went on the offensive. No longer the slow and defensive creature of before, he avoided all of Dallions attacks, while simultaneously casting a spell within his fur.

Magic symbols mixed and merged, creating a pattern that Dallion couldnt make out. The aetherfish, though, did, for it cast a spell of its own. A green sphere surrounded the platypain, only to be shattered moments later with such force that all of Dallions instances instinctively jumped back.

Whats that? Dallion asked.

Assembly, Gem replied.

Assembly? Dallion split into instances once more. The moment some of them looked around, searching for the realm portals, he saw what the familiar had meant.

The labyrinth of mirrors had vanished. There was no maze, no portals, the hundreds of realms had all collapsed into one cube-like reality. However, what made it particularly annoying was that while the whole of reality appeared to be one three-dimensional cube of interconnected corridors, the guardian had multiplied. A quick glance revealed close to twenty of him in various parts of the cube. However, those werent instances or echoesDallion could see threads of magic going through mirrored walls, connecting each. That wasnt his only problem. The walls themselves seemed to be both there and not, phasing in and out of existence at random intervals.

He broke reality, Dallion thought.

Interesting, Nil mused. I havent seen that spell outside of theoretical studies.

Dont be so enthusiastic about it! Dallion shouted as his instances dispersed throughout the mirror cube. A few of them were blinked out of existence as walls materialized through them. The rest cast identical spells, sending aether projectiles at the various guardians. Six even managed to hit their target, but all that did was cause one of the platypus copies to pop out of existence, the magic thread returning to those that survived.

Now that hed seen that his enemy wasnt indestructible, Dallion split again, this time in far more instances than before. All he had to do was keep this up until

Thats not the right way, Harps echoy voice resonated in his mind. You have to do something different.

Itll be fine, Dallion replied.

His instances were still successfully killing off guardians, but the difficulty seemed to increase with each iteration. If Dallion had managed to kill off six instances of the platypain, he could only pick one reality. The second time, only eight of his instances were lucky, even if there were close to a sixty of them. The time after then only three managed to get a hit.

The platypus wasnt only learning how to counteract Dallions tactics, but had gone back to casting spells of his ownattack spells that Dallion had to take into account in addition to everything else. Several seconds later he had to admit that the harpsisword was righthe couldnt win this way.

Harp, what do I have to do? he asked.

Use magic, the nymph guardian replied. Copy the spell I show you.

I thought you couldnt teach me magic.

*There always are exceptions. Just follow my lead.*

Dallion expected the nymph to emerge in her full form and start drawing symbols. Instead, the harpsisword strings vibrated, only this time, the invisible threads of music formed symbols in the air.

Magic music, Dallion thought. A fascinating concept he had thought about a few times, though never actually tried, maybe considering it too out there.

Without wasting a moment, he combined spellcraft, music, and attack skills. The tip of the blade moved about, following the path created by the sound. A pattern began to emerge. It was as if Dallion were drawing in the air using light instead of paint.

Remember the symbols that go into making this, Harp said. All of them are things you know.

Dallion concentrated. Knowing that he was dealing with something familiar helped to a degree, but it was like trying to make out the brand name of a very stretched plastic bag. Even with dozens of instances, Dallion made more mistakes than he would have liked. Thankfully, his efforts paid off.

## **SPELL RECOMBINATION**

**(+2 Mind)**

**You have successfully translated a pattern spell into magic symbols. Sometimes the pieces of something are worth more than the whole. However, that only works if you know the pieces to begin with.**

A blast of water shot from the space in front of Dallions hand, as if hed created a magic water hose. There was no pushback, not even the slightest tension. The water kept on shooting forward with the intention of blasting everything in its path. Hitting into the first materialized wall in the reality cube, it went on, spreading to other sections. The beauty and horror of it all was that even after seconds had passed, the spell had no intention of stopping. Instinctively, Dallion pulled back his hand, believing he could reduce the flow. The stream continued unimpeded, sprouting from the spot in the air it had before.

You can move back if you want, Harp said. The spell will keep on going on its own.

What is it?

*A water elemental spell. This is how you create water from magic.*

This is no creation spell. I recognized some of the symbols. This is a portal.

Good. There was a grain of pride in the nymphs voice. Youre learning. You opened a portal to a magic reality full of water. In that reality, water can never end, so it will continue to fill this realm until theres nothing left to fill.

Im flooding a realm? Dallion just realized the power he had unleashed. You can sink entire realms?

*There always are conditions. This is a small magic realm, so yes, it can be filled easily. Other realms, like the dryad world swords, will react differently. A large amount of water can be unleashed, but it would never be fully sunk.*

During the conversation, the cube continued to get flooded before everyone's very eyes. The platypain realized it too, for it started casting barriers around itself in an attempt to stop the impending water.

Harp, you know that platypuses can swim, right? Dallion asked.

Platypains, the dryad corrected. Not anymore. You tore off its second layer of fur. Now it'll sink like a rock. And even if it didn't, water negates the magic it needs in order to remain in existence.

That's magic water? Dallion thought. One had to admit, it sounded cool. With this trick, there was so much he could achieve. Heck, there was no spell that could hold him. Doors could withstand the weight of an entire realm of water, and even if they could, Dallion would easily swim up to a window and use a point attack to break through the wall or ceiling.

You can only do that in realms, dear boy, Nil said in a stern voice. Unless you're a Moon.

So only they get to destroy the world? Dallion asked.

*That remains debatable. Scholars are still divided on the topic.*

The water level had already reached Dallion's chest. Around twenty layers or corridors continued above, their floors phasing in and out of reality constantly. It was inevitable that they, too, would get flooded. Even the sections that the platypain was sealing off would.

You can surrender, you know, Dallion shouted. I don't know how long your barriers will hold out, but it'll be less than I can hold my breath.

How long is that? There was genuine curiosity in the creature's voice.

Dallion gave the question several seconds of thorough consideration.

I have no idea. Days, maybe? It had been a while since he'd had to swim and even then he hadn't remotely felt any pressure. In the real world, or even in most realms, he'd never have a reason to hold his breath for more than a few hours. Does it matter?

*I guess not. I still want to find out.*

Suit yourself.

The conversation ended there. For one thing, being submerged made talking a bit more difficult for Dallion. For a short period of time, he considered remaining there in the middle of the reality cube just to show the guardian who's boss. Finding it childish, he then used instances to swim up to the layers on top thanks to his instances.

Bit by bit, Dallion moved closer and closer to the top layer of this reality. Just below it, he stopped. There was no point in taking useless chances, not when the guardian could still cast a spell that could potentially kill him off.

You are a weird one, the platypain said. Those who have empathy choose not to use magic. Those who have magic choose to forget about their empathy. You make use of both traits.

Thats because Im an otherworlder, Dallion replied through non-verbal means.

*You arent the first otherworlder whos been put in that situation. You arent even the first one from Earth. It will be interesting seeing how far you get.*

**The AETHERIZER Guardian has admitted defeat.**

**Do you accept his surrender?**

Dallion smiled. That made two. Reaching out, he tapped the thumbs up rectangle.

**AETHERIZER level 2 has been cleared!**

**Continue to fulfill the AETHERIZERs destiny.**

The cube suddenly unraveled, returning to the standard form of the mirror corridor. The water, and the spell creating it, remained. That presented something of an issue. As Dallion had said, he could hold his breath for ludicrous amounts of time, but fighting in water was among his least favorite pastimes. His casting speed wasnt going to suffer thanks to the method he currently used, but any movement

**The AETHERIZER Guardian has admitted defeat.**

**Do you accept his surrender?**

Huh? Dallion blinked. Hadnt he already accepted the guardians surrender?

Maybe this was a glitch? With multiple realms converging in one, maybe something had glitched out. Slowly, he reached out and pressed the appropriate rectangle again.

**AETHERIZER level 3 has been cleared!**

**The AETHERIZERs destiny has been fulfilled.**

Dallion found himself back in his room. The artifact in his hand was fully lit, glowing a calm blue light.

A cascade of feelings went through Dallions mind as he remained motionless, staring at the item. He was glad to have cleared the item, and yet at the same time he somehow cheated. For one thing, hed never had a chance to glimpse the final guardian, let alone fight. It was the fighting that Dallion was looking forward to the only practical experience he was getting while at the Academy. Practicing spells was all and good, but they remained theoretical fields. As Dallions father back on Earth had said, law books can give you all the knowledge in the world, but you need courtroom experience to get a sense of the real thing.

Just as he was about to say something, a purple rectangle flashed in front of him, just above the artifact.

**MODIFIED ACTIVE AETHERIZER**

**The water within the aetherizer increased the range of the item twenty-fold, allowing it to detect magic vortexes within a twenty-mile radius.**

**The level of the vortex is indicated by the number of concentric circles around it.**

**In order to function, the aetherizer needs to be attuned to its owner via a realm link.**

A vortex detector? Dallion turned, focusing his attention on the harpsisword. The water spell wasn't just a way to defeat the guardian. You know that this would happen, didn't you?

Yes, Harp replied.

How? Dallion asked. And why didn't you tell me? He added mentally to himself.

That's the real purpose of these devices. My kind were the ones that made them.

Chapter 714: Star Aspirations

Art skills on a metalin? Palag asked. The confusion in his voice was only surpassed by concern. That's a strange choice.

Crap! Sorry, Dallion said, pulling all his magic back. The rectangles around the metalin abruptly disappeared. I didn't sleep too well last night.

An outright lie, but given the pressure he had subjected himself, an excusable one. In truth, he was still thinking about the artifact he'd obtained. Harp had played a vital role when fulfilling its destiny, doing so in such fashion so that it became something invaluable. According to Nil, vortex spotters were pretty much a dime a dozen; one able to spot something in a twenty-mile range now that was an absolute treasure. When combined with Lux's speed and Dallion's combat splitting ability, he'd be able to pinpoint all vortexes in a vast area.

There was no doubt that Harp had planned this. She had let Dallion fight long enough just to confirm he had the skills to defeat the level two guardian, then put her plan in motion. What was more, there was every possibility that she had something to do with the final guardian's surrender.

Bad sleep again? The fury shook his head. I'm aware of your private training, but shouldn't exhaust you to such an extent. Is there anything more I should know?

I moved to a more complicated section of spells, Dallion lied. Getting them working is difficult.

With the wave of his hand, Palag made the metalin vanish out of existence. In its place, a table appeared. Being a mage for long enough, Dallion knew that was an invitation for a talk; and also he had to summon his own chair.

Going through the motions, Dallion drew the spell in the air. A three-legged stool popped into existence. At the sight of it, the fury instructor chuckled.

Do you know what's the most common mistake mages make? Palag asked, sitting in the air in front of the table.

Rushing to become apprentices? Dallion took his seat.

That's a good one, but no. Some rush, some slack, but all seem to think that magic is infinite. There's this belief that magic allows you to summon everything or anything at no cost. As if there's an

endless resource of power out there, allowing us to become Moons. The truth is, there isn't. We are just a focus lens.

Dallion nodded. He was already aware of all that from Nil. Magic was, in effect, stolen from other realms. The novice mages drew that magic from their own personal realm, or took it from the threads in the real world. In order to amass personal magic, though, it had to be stolen from elsewhere. That's what the vortexes were—the embodiment of realms that intersected with the reality of the real world. As for the most powerful mages, they devised methods to drain it directly from other worlds.

On its own, a lens has no strength, not without the light that shines through it. You, like many mages before you, are trying to stretch yourself so as to become a larger lens. Danger aside, that won't help you as much as you think.

The metaphor took a sudden turn, leaving Dallion confused.

You're saying I need to find more light? he asked.

In a manner of speaking. The best you could do is get closer to the source.

The source? Did that mean the instructor was telling him to increase his magic trait more?

The Purple Moon. The closer you get to him, the stronger your magic would become. You're already been given a lot. Divine magic flows through you, but you still keep your distance.

Chills ran down Dallion's spine. He wasn't sure what the fury was asking from him, but he knew a recruitment pitch when he saw one. Back on Earth, his parents would frequently have a long talk with him regarding cults, drugs, and strangers. After being accepted to college, Dallion had been forced to listen through a long tirade of the dangers involved and how to spot people trying to recruit him. Who would have thought that all that would become useful at the Academy, of all places?

From here on, there were only a few ways the conversation could continue. Either Dallion would be invited to an elite secret mage society—the better of the two options—or he'd be convinced that it was his destiny to rise as the next Star. Being the one who had killed the last, it was a logical conclusion, if Dallion was a power-hungry maniac, that was.

The Order won't have me, Dallion said, pretending to be stupid.

The Order, The fury laughed. Sounds just like them. I was almost taken by the Order once. Did I mention that?

You know very well that you didn't. Dallion slowly shook his head.

A lot of battle orphans usually end up there. The Order makes a point of putting anyone they can into their monasteries. You don't have to be awakened or even human. A place where the weak could thrive, they claim. There are people who gladly offer their children to them just for that promise. The fury's eyes narrowed into a frown. They'd almost got me as well. I was taken in, washed, fed, and given a place to sleep. No one forced me into anything, but that's how traps work. If I hadn't awakened

Palag suddenly blinked, as if driven by an external force.



Sorry. He quickly stood up, covering his eyes. I still get a bit emotional when thinking about my past. He brushed something off, then looked back at Dallion. What Im trying to say is that there are ways of getting closer to the Purple Moon, and Im not talking about praying or all that. He waved his hand dismissively. Very scholarly and practical ways. To achieve that, you only need two things: the correct spella rather complicated one, as you might guess and Galateas Moonstone.

Now things became clear. It was a sort of recruiting attempt. Dallion wasnt stupid enough to take it at face value, but from everything hed learned about magic so far, he wasnt ready to dismiss it outright. It had been said that Moonstones could be used as components of devices, so why not have them be part of spells as well?

Thats rubbish, Nil grumbled. So far, he didnt have the best record when it came to Moon-magic. Theres nothing that the stone would give you that you havent gained already. For goodness sake, its already in your realm. Do you feel absolute power?

Dallion didnt. At the same time, he couldnt deny what had happened to him when he had consumed some of the aether whales magic in the Moons realm. If he absorbed some of the Moonstone, would the same happen?

I dont know, Dallion said. Thats not the reason for my insomnia.

The fury waited. Dallion could see that he didnt have any interest in what was troubling him. Pea-sized blobs of annoyance and eagerness were visible just behind the instructors eye.

I have friends outside, Dallion said, carefully observing the others reactions. In the war.

Had, Palag corrected. All your friends are here now.

Not the answer Dallion was expecting.

The sad truth is that mages and commons dont mix. Anyway, I think we should end it here.

Reality shifted, taking them both back to the classroom. Other than them, there was no one in the room, but Dallion had gotten used to that by now.

Itll be better if you take a break for a few days, the fury suggested. Several scrolls rose up from his desk. If you really want to do a bit more learning, use this, but no realm practicing in this or anything else.

I still have my sessions with mage Katka, Dallion half-protested. To be honest, he had no intention of doing that either. What he really wanted to do was something that he knew Nil would oppose.

Dont overdo it. And think about what I said. Theres a lot to gain and nothing to lose.

Usually, when one said that, it was a guaranteed lie. Dallion nodded politely, frowned slightly to give the impression he was considering it, and left the room.

Novices were rushing up and down the corridor, hurrying to get to class on time. Dallion didnt even bother to avoid them, fully aware theyd trickle around him on their own. A few greeted him in passing, thankfully too much in a rush for Dallion to have to respond.

No class today? a familiar voice asked.

Dallion looked up only to see Phoils familiar grin.

Damn it! He had completely forgotten about the arrangement theyd come to.

I wasnt in form, so Palag let me go, Dallion explained. What about you?

I have an excuse, the large boy replied. I can skip all classes if I want to.

That figured. Phoil was no Raven, but he still was the child of a noble family.

So, you ready?

Dallion wanted to tell the boy to get lost or leave it for another day. Yet the sudden meeting reminded him of an opportunity. It was unlikely that Phoil had the connections to leave the building, but Raven definitely did, and if that was the case, he could get someone out as well.

Seen Raven lately? Dallion changed the topic.

A bit. Hes busy and keeps to himself.

The deal we made. How about instead of giving me what you promised to arrange for a meeting with Raven?

Hey, no fair! Theres no way I can just

Im not talking to you. Dallion stared the boy straight in the eye. I know you want the improvement pretty bad. Theres something I want from Raven. Make that happen and Ill do it.

Phoils mouth opened, then closed. The echoes in his realm were no doubt considering the offer. After a few seconds, he reluctantly nodded.

When? he asked in a dark tone.

Now is good?

You better be worth it. The large boy grumbled, then tilted his head briskly, telling Dallion to follow him.

*What mess have you gotten yourself into?*

Nil asked as Dallion walked down the corridor alongside Phoil.

Why so negative? Dallion asked.

*Because I know you. Nothing good will come from venturing outside. Trust me on that. The shardflies are not your fault. I know theres no such thing as a coincidence, but if you were the cause of the shardfly outbreak, youd*

Be kicked out? Dallion interrupted.

*No. Quite the contrary. Youd be locked up in a small magic room and examined so the effect could be replicated. Despite all the glamor on the surface, the Academy can be a rather dark place when it comes to gathering knowledge. You, of all people, should know that.*

Ravens room was in the same section as all the rest. However, that wasnt where Phoil was leading them. Rather, they went to the main section of the Learning Hall, then up the staircase to the second

floor. It was almost beyond belief that Raven would be allowed the room of an apprentice, yet that was precisely what happened. The room was a small building close to the staircase intersection. The columns were composed of large statues, all with their individual coats of arms. Looking closely, Dallion recognized the crest of the Dreud family.

Without bothering to knock, Phoil opened the door and walked in.

No knocking? Dallion asked as he stepped in behind him.

Why should he? Raven asked. He was dressed in an expensive house robe of shifting color made of gem fabric, if one had to guess. Underneath, Dallion could see the collar of a rather casual shirt. I knew you'd come.

Dallion nodded, taking a moment to take in the building's interior. Similar to those he'd visited, the inside was a lot bigger than the outside, composed of a large foyer decorated with statues and paintings from which an elegant staircase led up to the private section.

An apprentice lent it to me, Raven said, his expression gaining three levels of smugness. Not my first choice, but it would do. So, what do you want?

Well Dallion glanced in the direction of Phoil.

Oh, just say it. No one cares that he'll hear.

I want to be allowed to go out. Once is enough, but I need it to happen fast.

There was a moment of silence.

One-way trip? the black-haired asked.

There and back again. At least, that was the plan.

It could be arranged. I'll probably have to come along. Will that be a problem?

No. I just need to check something.

When?

Now will be best. After I do what I'm supposed to do.

It can be arranged. Provided you manage your work. I've been told that it's a tricky task, even for experts.

I'll pull it off. If I don't, our deal is off and you don't have to do anything.

For a split second, a blue glint flashed in Raven's eyes.

Get started, he ordered.

Chapter 715: Improved Forging

It had been ages since Dallion had improved a sword. The last weapon he had actively leveled up was the training stiletto that his mentor Vend had given him back in Nerosal. That had stopped once Dallion had reached the magic material barrier. Although there was constant talk of people improving something to sky silver, it turned out that there was more fantasy in that tale than reality. The truth was that despite some individuals being able to achieve the feat, there came a point after

which an item simply could not be improved. The level would increase, but the material would remain the same, stuck at dark platinum.

The weapon that Phoil brought was by no means as advanced. Dallion could recognize the iron silver alloy brought to him. It was a popular combination, preferred by nobles in the last century or so. The weight made it impractical for ordinary people, but an awakened even a child could handle it with ease.

Heirloom? Dallion asked.

It's not screaming, is it? Phoil said, avoiding the question. In all probability, the weapon had been procured from some dubious merchant such as the General.

And you want it changed directly to

Silver glass, Raven finished the sentence for him. Both seemed rather impatient.

In different circumstances, Dallion would ask what was so special about the material, but he doubted he'd receive an honest answer. Also, he was the one asking the favor of Raven, so it was in his best interest not to ask too many questions until he got what he wanted.

Carefully, he took the sword and placed it on the floor.

You might want to take a few steps back, he said.

Why? Phoil asked.

In case it doesn't work.

You said that

He's not a Moon, Phoil. Raven made the smart choice. Accidents are always a possibility.

I knew that. The large boy grumbled, then stepped away from the weapon.

Dallion smiled.

Here goes nothing. He placed his hand on the blade.

### **ITEM AWAKENING**

A green rectangle appeared. The surroundings blinked, replaced by reflective metal walls.

Too soon, Dallion thought, brushing away the subsequent rectangles that emerged. Anything mirror related was still giving him urges to go all out and shatter it to bits.

Sense anything, Nox? Dallion asked, making his way to the single archway leading outside the large room.

Nope, the familiar responded in yawny fashion. Just you.

That was good. It meant things would be simple. Dallion reached out to summon his harpsisword, but then stopped. Using magic was more beneficial. As Nil kept on repeating, he had to start thinking as a mage from now on.

There were over a dozen combat spells he could use, half of them rather well. In the end, he chose to go with aether projectiles. Purple markers appeared. Visible only to him, they floated near his hand, indicating the symbols he had to draw to execute the spell.

The moment Dallion stepped in the guardian chamber, the spell was cast, obliterating the unfortunate creature a male silver colossus before the red combat rectangle could emerge.

Sorry, Dallion whispered, knowing he'd have to do the whole thing again moments later.

**COMBAT INITIATED**

**TERMINAL HIT**

**DEALT DAMAGE IS INCREASED BY 1000%**

The rectangles emerged, catching up to events. The combat was over. Now it was time to focus on changing the material.

Dallion burst into instances, reaching out to the improvement rectangle with his magic. All the time spent training the discipline had let him be a bit better than initially, though not enough to perform the selective improvement without instances.

**SWORDS level increased**

**The SWORD has been improved to QUICKSILVER**

The realm attempted to eject him to reality. Dallion concentrated, triggering a second awakening before the first could end. As a result, he remained where he was, facing a quicksilver colossus.

Sorry again, he said, and recast the projectile spell with each hand.

Three rectangles flashed in rapid succession. Dallion concentrated on the last. His instances plucked the endless stack, pulling out materials the sword could turn into. A hundred and fifty options crossed Dallion's hands, yet none of them were silver glass.

*Crap!*

Not losing his calm, Dallion chose a silver alloy he was used to, then let himself be brought back to the real world.

What's the holdup? Raven asked as Dallion slid his fingers along the blade.

Give me a moment, he grumbled.

No air bubbles or structural weaknesses seemed to have formed on the weapon. The sides of the blade remained adequately sharp. Only the color had slightly shifted, though not to a degree that the others would notice.

Attempting four improvements in a row was generally not recommended. There was always the chance that an item could become distorted. Improving it four times in immediate succession could well be devastating for the guardian as well.

Are you hanging on in there? Dallion asked.

That was rough, the sword replied.

*Yeah. Sorry about that.*

Only now did it cross his mind that all of this could have been avoided if Dallion had acted the way he had back in Nerosal. As much as he hated to admit it, he was still obsessed with defeating guardians just as much as achieving the result.

I should have asked you to surrender, Dallion said, using his music skills to appease the sword guardian.

*You should have.*

*If I do now, will you agree to it?*

You want to improve me again? There was more surprise than fear coming from the sword. Why? Do you really think you can achieve what they want?

*I take it Im not the first to try?*

*Heck, Ive stopped counting. Youve better than most, but no different. Its impossible to create silver glass. They said it themselves.*

That didnt sound at all good. Yet, if that were the case, why hadnt Nil mentioned it before? And why was he so adamant that it was nothing special? If the people behind the echoes had invested so much time and effort, there had to be a reason and it was more than having a shiny sword.

Hold that thought, Dallion said.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality changed, this time taking him to his own realm. To little surprise, Nil was nowhere to be found. However, GenDallions first echowas there.

I knew youd try that, the echo said. Even before you thought of it.

He turned, looking in the direction of the realms library.

Theres nothing there about silver glass. Ive gone through all the scrolls and tomes I could find. And when I was done, I sent Ariel to check. If there ever was anything on the topic, Nil must have destroyed it.

Dallion wasnt surprised. Fortunately, there was one other expert when it came to metals he could go to one that didnt hide that he was feeling neglected lately.

Lux, Dallion said. The firebird appeared, surrounding him in blue flames, then flew him right to the bay, or more specifically to Ondas new tower.

The nymph hadnt spared any effort into an even greater masterpiece than before, which in his view meant making it as close to a futuristic cyberpunk building as one could imagine. Given the races affinity for magic, and the artifacts they had created, Dallion was starting to think that they were a lot more technologically advanced than they let on.

A small magical portal formed in the air a few feet from Dallion, then flashed out of existence, replaced by Gem.

Hello, boss Dal! The aetherfish greeted. And boss Lux.

Boss Lux? Dallion asked. He dreaded to think what the firebird had taught the newest of his companions.

*Bos Lux told me thats the proper way to address beings of a higher level. And since Im just a level one*

Figures. Dallion sighed. Onda! he said loudly. I need to talk to you.

Nothing but the sound of wind and distant waves replied.

Onda?

Yeah sure. You only think of me when you need something! A reply came from within the tower. Will you ever forge anything? When I joined you, I thought youd make masterpieces, instead

Do you want me to leave? Dallion was in no mood for whining. It wasnt that the guardian was wrong. Dallion had been somewhat neglecting the inhabitants of his realm while focusing on progressing in spellcraft and magic.

In dallions mind there was a fifty-fifty chance that Onda cursed him off. Then again, the guardians desire proved stronger than his apathy. A section of the tower opened, letting the gearpunk nymph emerge.

Whats bugging you? he asked, giving Dallion an unmistakable glare.

Whats silver glass.

The nymph whistled. Jumping to the big leagues?

I thought magic metals were the big leagues. At least that was what Dallions understanding was. Back when he had acquired his forging skills and had chosen his first hammer, hed received lots of grief choosing an ability he wasnt ready for.

Nah, thats basic stuff. Thread forging, magic forging, those are the big leagues. Youve got a good boost, but youre far from forging silver glass.

Technically, Dallion didnt want to forge it, but improve an item to it. That made matters even worse. If that was beyond the improvement barrier he could make a thousand attempts and none of them would work.

Whats so special about Silver glass ?

How much time do you have? Onda smirked. A tendril of water emerged from the sea nearby and made its way to the nymph. Whats this? he asked as it watched changed form.

Onda, I really dont have the time for this

Want my help? Tell me.

Dallion felt like using a spell or ten on the guardian. Of course, that would hardly speed things up. Besides, for all his current attitude, Onda was a child and helpful, as hed often described himself.

Water in the shape of a cube, he said.

Nope. Onda tightened his grip round the object. Instead of splashing, the water disappeared. Its nothing. Because he paused. Almost nothing can cross realms.

Nice save, Dallion thought.

Silver Glass is one of the materials that can cross realms. Not have an identical copy in the realm, not have some other item to bring it in. Silver Glass allows an item to pass on its own.

And what can that make it useful for?

There was silence.

You dont know?

Hey, I know plenty! Its just it cant be used for much. Quicksilver is unstable. After a few months, it reverts to some other material. Steel or silver alloy, or something. It never had any practical usage, just people used to show off.

That made even less sense. Dallion had grown accustomed to Nil hiding certain facts, but now that Onda had confirmed it, he was at a complete loss. There was no question that nobles were vain creatures, but not to this extent. Besides, the current time was the worst to be showing off. With internal and external wars raging, the last anyone would be interested in was the glow of someones weapon.

Anyway, can you teach me how to create it? Dallion returned to his original line of questioning.

Thats tricky. Only otherworlders can create it, he said. For some reason, that didnt seem as surprising as Dallion thought it would be. I can still offer advice, though.

Any suggestions on how to improve something it?

Concentrate on it? The guardian shrugged.

Not the best advice by any means, yet it was better than nothing. Leaving his realm, Dallion went back into the sword. This time, he intended to take an entirely different approach. Upon entering the guardians chamber, he didnt cast any spells, nor did he attack.

Hey. He waved to the colossus. Ready for another go?

No fighting this time? the guardian asked, iron muscles tensed up.

No fighting, Dallion said. Have you ever been silver glass?

The guardian shook his head. A moment later, a blue rectangle emerged.

**The SWORD guardian has admitted defeat.**

**Do you accept his surrender?**

Dallion accepted, then used combat splitting to transform him into quicksilver. That step was easy, just as before. From a hundred possibilities, five offered the option. Now it was time for the next attempt. Although the guardian hadnt mentioned it, Dallion knew this would be the last improvement attempt.

Concentrate on it, Dallion thought.



It would be nice if he could simply will things into happening, but improvement didnt work that way. Or didnt it? An idea came to mind. So far, he had been so focused on getting the result that he hadnt considered that he might become the driving force.

The second time the surrender rectangle emerged, Dallion didnt immediately accept. Walking up to the guardian, he placed his hand on the entitys biceps. Magic treads emerged from his fingers, establishing contact. Then, he pressed the thumbs up icon with his free hand.

Hundreds of rectangles filled the air. They were like skills, at the same time not like skills. Each was attached to the guardian, and each held the name of a material.

Wow, Dallion thought.

That was the proper way of improving, not the brute force method that hed used so far. In this instance, there was no chance, no luck, nothing but certainty. There was no telling whether the mage had tried to subtly guide him to this or even he had been so focused on old tomes and theories that didnt know better.

So much for learning all the probability trees, Dallion said to himself. Through this method, he was able to bypass everything and pick the result he wished for.

Splitting into instances, he skimmed through the cloud of rectangles. After a while, he found the desired goalone single rectangle with the words SILVER GLASS on it. There was just one among a thousand, glistening in the light, that identified it as being from another world. The odds of finding it by chance were a tenth of a percent at most.

Lets see what happens now, Dallion said, and extended his magic to the rectangle.

**SWORD level increased**

**The SWORD has been improved to SILVER GLASS**

Chapter 716: Vortex Cluster

A thin shimmering layer covered the sword once Dallion returned to the real world.it wasnt the standard shimmering of an otherworlder, at least not entirely. There was a slight nuance to it, making it appear both to be part of this world, but also not.

This what you wanted? Dallion stood up.

Based on the intense emotions resonating from both Phoil and Raven, the answer was obvious. Even so, the black-haired noble had no desire to surrender a compliment.

How many tries did it take you? he asked.

Two. Does it matter?

Not particularly.

Internally, Dallion frowned. Hed learned to accept that nobles respected items, least of all.

Alright, then. Now about your part of the deal? I need to be out before dark.

Ill keep my word. Raven pointed at the sword in a slow, dismissive fashion. That was more than enough for Phoil to pick up the weapon. Instead of heading outside, though, he went up the stairs to

the private area of the building. Itll take me a bit to get my seal adjusted. Meet you at the door in half an hour?

Half an hour. Dallion nodded. See you there.

This was the best deal hed get, so there was no point in shaking the boat. He himself had something to pick up from his room.

Onda, did you get all that? Dallion asked as he went back into the corridor.

Well done, old man. One could almost hear the nymph clapping. Lamer than me, but still cool.

*What did I do wrong?*

*Nothing. Everything was perfect. The set up, the way you convinced the guardian, the selection of the material. Its your logic thats messed up. No, not exactly messed up, just too dependent on other things.*

*Hmm.*

Keeping himself from running along the corridor, Dallion made his way to his room. The new feat hed achieved filled him with more energy than was healthy. He tried getting rid of some of it by extending magic threads out of his handweaving them into a rope, as Katka had instructedbut that made him even more restless. Magic had a way to make its owner feel invincible, almost as if hed drunk a bucket of energy drinks.

Ruby, were heading outside. Dallion pulled back the cluster of threads back into him, then took the aetherizer he kept hidden in a drawer with an invisibility symbol on it. How do you feel about that?

The shardfly stoically flew off the spot on the ceiling, taking its place on Dallions shoulder. For some reason, that reminded Dallion of Gleam.

Within seconds, the euphoria he had accumulated vanished without a trace. Was he capable of bringing the shardfly back? It had to be more complicated than opening a portal to the banished world. And even if it wasnt, Dallion had no way of reaching that realm again.

Tell me when you sense nearby illusions, okay? Dallion said.

Okay. Ruby flocked his wings.

And dont get into any fights, even if Im attacked. Got it?

Dallion looked at his heavy gear. Considering what he would be facing, having his armadil shield and harpsisword would help. Unfortunately, hed have to make do with his Nox dagger.

Less than a minute was necessary for Dallion to reach the main door of the building. Judging by the occasional look of disapproval he received from passing apprentices, it was safe to say that the glamor from the challenge was starting to wear off. And then there was the waiting. Every second dragged on. Unlike Dallion, Raven didnt seem to be remotely in a hurry to get there.

Now you know what it feels like for guardians, Nil commented.

Precisely thirty minutes after he'd promised, Raven appeared, walking calmly down the corridor. Surprisingly, he wasn't alone.

Mage Tisaku? Dallion asked.

The man didn't seem at all pleased to be there. The fact that he was showed the pull Ravens family had.

Dallion, the man acknowledged the others presence as he walked by, stopping right in front of the door. Two hours, he said, fingers drawing an intricate pattern faster than the human eye could see. A top level awakened would have trouble following the design. Unlike the standard spell, this was composed of a single pattern.

Purple light blended with the threads and symbols covering the door's surface, melting them away.

Try not to get in trouble. I don't want to owe the White Eye favors. The door opened.

Yes, mage. Dallion was the only one to answer.

Meanwhile, Raven passed by as if both of them were beneath him. The sad truth was that thanks to his father, they probably were.

From such an angle, the surroundings seemed a lot better than what Dallion had seen from the rooftop. That was to be expected; the mages had taken great care to cover all undesirable sights with illusions. If one didn't know better, they would swear that the cluster of buildings surrounding the Learning Hall was pretty much the same as it always had been. Occasionally, there would be small signs that something was wrong; some magic symbols wouldn't glow as bright, some streets would have a quarter of the people they were supposed to, but the illusion was close to perfect.

Well, we're out. Raven looked at Dallion. How what?

Now, I need to see a dwarf.

After ten steps, Ruby mentioned that they were near an illusion. The spell was quite subtle, creating the impression that Dallion was walking along the same path. In a matter of minutes, he had reached his destination; the shop he had frequented so many times while outside.

That wasn't remotely true. Discreetly casting the spell that let him see through illusions, Dallion found that he'd reached an entirely new area. The level of the spell was beyond impressive; it had successfully created a false memory of the area and maintained it as reality, while in truth shards were destroying more and more of the surroundings.

A few steps from the shop, Dallion stopped. A small, quickly constructed building was in front of him. It was impossible to tell whether he'd find the same people on the inside, or the whole thing was nothing but a fake facade.

Aren't you going in there? Raven asked.

No. Some things were better left uncertain. I changed my mind. There's somewhere else I need to be.

Ignoring the nobles comments, Dallion went back through illusion to the first place the potion lab. The trip took slightly longer than Dallion remembered. To his surprise, the actual building was still there, mostly intact.

You're here to buy potions? Raven crossed his arms. I could have gotten you everything this third-rate place could make.

It's not potions I've come for. Wait for me here, okay?

The black-haired shrugged, then summoned a chair for him to sit in.

Reciting the names of the seven Moons, Dallion opened the door and stepped right in. The lab was in relatively good shape, if abandoned. Gone were the apprentices slaving away, as were most of their tools and material components.

Splitting into a dozen instances, Dallion went on. Every few seconds, he'd pause and split again, in case a flutter of shardflies came flying at him from somewhere. Thankfully, no such thing happened.

Mage, he said, as he approached the office of the lab's owner. Mage? He entered.

The room was a lot smaller than he remembered. Seated on a rickety chair, slumped over a small old desk, was the mage. A strong stench of alcohol came filled the room, mixed in with tobacco smoke.

Mage?

Mage no more, the man said. His appearance was in worse shape than the room itself. One could only speculate how long it had taken him to reach such a wretched state, but it was more than a few weeks.

The Academy rogued you?

Ha. The man let out a sad laugh. If they had rogued me, at least I'd have something. Now, I'm just a nobody that's sentenced to remain here. I lost my reputation with this. All the conniving schemers that wanted to take me down had their chance. Everyone important wouldn't speak to me, and anyone less important doesn't want to have anything to do with me. He pushed an empty glass across the desk.

Dallion couldn't be sure whether he was being offered a drink or expected to fill the glass. Ultimately, he did neither.

My apprentices left, as did all my customers. The mage cast a spell, pulling the glass back. As he did, it filled up with murky liquid. The archmage generously offered me temporary quarters in the apprentice wing. Me! he tapped his chest with a finger. To live with common apprentices.

Would have been better than here, Dallion thought.

Why not leave the Academy? Dallion asked. Temporarily.

No one's leaving the Academy. Not with the war going on. The web of lies is in full effect. One province has fallen, two more are all losing ground. And the idiots in the south are still engaged in their petty squabbles. He grabbed the glass and downed it in one go. For a moment, the stench in the

room got worse. Mages are too precious to be out in the open. Emperors orders. The way things are going, well be ordered to fight.

So, its that bad, Dallion thought.

Hed long suspected it, but this was the first time hed gotten actual confirmation if the words of a drunk could be believed. Looking at him, it was clear that the mage was a potion maker and an academic. He was not fit for combat. Hed probably forgotten all his combat spells decades ago, relying on the impenetrable strength of the Academy. His reputation was the most valuable thing he had, and now that was gone as well.

Theyll be a need of potions again, Dallion said, using his music skills to add as much joy to his words as possible.

If the war doesnt finish us, the blasted shardflies would! The man tried to take another gulp from his glass, only then noticing it was empty. Youre the hunter, arent you? he asked. Your levels too high to be anything else.

Here we go, Dallion prepared mentally.

I guess I must thank you. I wanted to get you kicked out after you sealed off my room in the basement. Truth is you did me a favor. I dont know what spell you cast on the shardflies, but they didnt attack anyone here or try to destroy the place. They destroyed lots of buildings around me, but never mine.

The swarms came from here?

Who knows? Maybe they did, maybe they didnt. All of them appeared from the ground. The idiots thought they could stop them, and they did. The shardflies have been contained, but no one has any idea why they became active in the first place.

This whole place might be built on a shardfly nest Dallion whispered, more to himself than the mage.

Worst of all, it was all but confirmed that he had caused a stir with his arrival. An empath with nightmares of void was enough to stir any creature. No doubt it had happened subconsciously. Neither Dallion nor the creatures suspected. Even so, something had kept disturbing the shardflies, causing them to drill above ground and lash out at anything in sight.

And the Academy has no overseer, he added.

Overseer. The mage laughed. We have enough battle constructs to destroy armies. Thats the problem, though. Everyone is too good at destroying. Those that arent affected dont take the shardflies seriously, and those that are, are already considering how to use that to their political advantage. I did. I even snatched a few buildings from a few people. All of them are now holes in the ground.

That sounded like something a mage would do. Yet, why hadnt the Archmage intervened? Even with everyone busy covering up the situation, there was no way he wouldnt notice by now. Unless, he too was covering up for the emperor. Such a dramatic failure could well be grounds for him to be replaced. Isolating the Learning Hall could well have been the best option from his point of view.

Dallion took out the aetherizer. He still had second thoughts about using it. Nonetheless, he linked the item to the realm and then activated it. The artifact turned purple.

*Holy crap!*

There had to be hundreds, if not thousands, or vortexes in the twenty miles area surrounding him; so many that he could tell when one started, and another ended, not what level they were. Suddenly, all this seemed more than a natural phenomenon.

Chapter 717: The Mage of Nerosal

Dozens of instances of Dallion rushed through the building as quickly as their skills would allow. Some didnt bother with the door, choosing to leap out of available windows.

Isnt your reaction a bit extreme, dear boy? Nil asked.

Dallion didnt bother arguing. He had long come to accept that there were certain topics which the echo could discuss rationally, and the current situation was one of them. Choosing one of the instances that had successfully landed outside the building, Dallion switched reality.

Dal? Raven asked a few steps away.

Splitting again, Dallion gave the noble a sign to stay still. If anything were to happen, it would happen now. Five seconds passed. Then ten. After another ten seconds, Dallion allowed himself a sigh of relief. If anything was supposed to happen, it would have already.

Whats going on? the black-haired asked in a whisper.

Nothing good.

Dallion needed a while to think. All of a sudden, he had no idea who to trust. Machinations were already at foot at the Academy. The faction that had set them in motion wouldnt be bothered if the entire Learning Hall and everything surrounding it got shredded by a hurricane of shardflies. If Dallion were to create a commotion, things might not turn out too well for him. For all he knew, that might be playing right into the culprits hands. It wasnt out of the question that

*Oh, crap!*

Dallion ripped the blocker ring off his neck chain and put it on. Part of him still refused to believe it, but another was starting to see a pattern of coincidences form.

Please, not you, Nil, he thought.

The old echo had supported him for yearsmillennia, as far as true time was concerned. Still, he remained a mage, and mages were petty and always eager to reclaim what they had lost. Adzorg must have planned that for years, long before meeting Dallion. All those secret missions he sent Jiroh and Eury on had to be connected with this. None of them ever knew exactly what they were searching for. Each time it would be something different: an artifact in the wilderness, an item swap with questionable merchants, treasures bought at night auctions. No one, Dallion least of all, could see the big picture, but he had seen Nils excuses.

Initially, he had believed that it was part of the echos restrictions. Some obscure rule that prevented him from knowing as much as his original knew. However, it was just as possible that Nil knew everything all the time and had just refused to share it. The constant insistence that Dallion remain

within the Learning Hall suddenly was clear. The echo had gone out of its way to encourage Dallion to take it easy and focus on his studies except when it came to its own suggestions. It was Nil who had convinced Dallion to get a seal pass; he had urged him to go see the dwarf who was an acquaintance of Adzorgsas well as go through the sewers in search of vortexes. What if the goal hadnt been to find vortexes, but to cast something while there? Thinking about it, the echo didnt even have to bother with spells; Dallion presence could have been enough to stir up any shardfly nests nearby.

Since when have you known Adzorg? Dallion turned to raven. If the whole series of events had been orchestrated by the ex-captain, then the weapon the black-haired had procured was part of that chain of events.

Who?

The mage of Nerosal. Dallion concentrated. The blocker ring prevented him from using his music skills to their fullest, but he still had enough experience to tell whether someone was lying.

Never heard of him. Raven was visibly tense. Yet, as far as Dallion could tell, the boy wasnt lying. What? Whos he? Whats this hand to do with

The Academy is under attack, Dallion whispered. He wasnt pleased he had to rely on Raven, but as things stood, he didnt have much of a choice.

Raven nodded. This time, though, there were no signs of surprise on his face.

I know, he whispered back. It has been for months.

He took a dagger from his boot and offered it to Dallion, hilt pointing forward. Without hesitation, Dallion grabbed it.

## **ITEM AWAKENING**

A green rectangle appeared, followed by two blue ones. The blues ones remained completely textless.

Nobles, Dallion thought. Even their items are shielded.

Nice place, Dallion said, looking around. The room was impressive in its plainness a perfect rectangle cube made of laminated wood. Clearly that was an illusion which Dallion couldnt see beyond for the moment. So, what do you know?

The wars not going well. Some Archdukes have been asking mages to help in the fight.

But the emperor doesnt want the Academy to get involved. I know.

No. Raven shook his head. The emperor has made no demand one way or another and neither has the Archmage. A council of academy mages has decided that theres no point in getting involved, mostly because they need to focus on internal events.

Let me guess. The shardflies are internal events.

It started as a nuisance that never goes away. Actions are taken and seem to have some effect, but then suddenly things get worse just when discussions are taking place.

You seem to know a lot. Have any mage echoes in there?

You know I do. Raven frowned. The trial wasn't an accident. Getting the Moonstones was planned all along. Originally, that was going to be the excuse for me to get a one-on-one with the Archmage and make my request. My father and the mages involved would do the talking through me. It was very likely we would have gotten our reinforcements already.

One had to admire the complexity and cruelty the nobles had gone through using their own children to jump through hoops, all with the aim of getting a message to the archmage without anyone learning. It was such a tangled web of lies and deceit that Dallion was astonished that it had gone this well. The Moonstones, which were so cherished, turned out to be nothing but a pretext. Even worse! Thinking logically, it didn't actually matter whether the trial was successful or not. The attempt alone was enough to attract attention, as Dallion had seen, and possibly merit a meeting with the Archmage in which he'd reassure the young noble that there was nothing to be ashamed of.

You're the son of Archduke Dreud, aren't you?

Raven nodded.

Of all the archdukes, he'd be the one who'd insisted on magic assistance most of all.

My father is convinced that there are spies at the Academy, the boy continued. Based on the level of interference, they must be pretty high up.

What if it's the Archmage himself?

It's possible, but highly unlikely. The Archmage wouldn't play such games. He'd just send mages who he knew wouldn't help. Despite our power, we aren't infallible. Accidents happen, mistakes are made, armies die.

Could Nil be the traitor? After the humiliation of being cast out, he'd want to settle the score with the Academy and the empire itself. Even if that were the case, though, he was too far away to run interference.

Do you have a way to get to the Archmage?

Not anymore. I can't ask openly or

I think the time for subtlety has passed. Make some noise. You'll probably get a stand-in, but he'll be someone important enough to attract the Archmage's attention. Meanwhile, I'll try something on my end.

You have friends in high places within the Academy? Surprise rang in each of Raven's words.

Calling them friends was a stretch, but Dallion knew people in high places, more specifically, he knew one person who was very high indeed. It wasn't someone he wanted anything to do with, but there didn't seem to be any other choice.

We'll need to do that tonight. Dallion said. Right after we get back. I think I'm being watched. He didn't want to admit having a spy in his realm, especially if the spy was someone he considered being a friend and, to some degree, even a father. If they aren't aware I've figured things out, they will. Is there anyone else in the group we can trust?



Just Phoil. His family has been loyal for generations.

Great That didnt sound reassuring. What about Cheska?

Cheska was an asset, like you. And Iksa cant do much. Her father is already on our side. He paused for a moment. Ill tell Phoil to wait for you in front of your room. He should be back after bribing

Forget Phoil. You do your thing and Ill do mine. With luck, one of us will get to the Archmage. Remember, all it takes is one to make it. And to survive afterwards, Dallion added mentally.

The conversation ended, bringing both of them back to the real world.

Without another world, they made their way through the streets of illusion to the Learning Hall. All in all, less than twenty minutes had passed, but the information obtained made Dallion feel as if months had passed.

Once inside, the two split up, each hurrying in their own direction. Raven rushed in the direction of the staircase, while Dallion used combat splitting and athletics to sprint to Katkas chambers. She had already hinted that the Earth mage group was willing to accept new members. Agreeing would not only help him in the short turn, but would clear his debt to the woman.

Unfortunately, when he got to her house, it was empty.

No! Dallion slammed a fist into the closed door.

It was nave to think hed find her here so early, but deep in his heart, he had hoped for the miracle to happen. Trying to reach her through the administration building was out of the question and he had made sure not to leave her any of his echoes. With the blocking item on, he couldnt even ask any of his familiars for help.

Excuse me, Dallion said to one of the apprentices walking by. Do you know where mage Katka is?

The apprentice stared at him as if he were a blade of grass. Slowly her mind clicked, as the rumors matched with the appearance she was looking at.

Novice Dallion? she asked.

Yes. I was supposed to have a training session with

Academy mages only come here to teach. If shes not here, she probably has urgent matters to attend to.

The response was as useless as the fake polite tone it tried to mimic.

I understand, Dallion said, using all his force of will to remain outwardly calm. Thank you, apprentice.

That had gone poorly. Now there was only one more person left in the Learning Hall he could trust. The issue was getting to him. The expected course of action was to return to his room to get his combat gear. Given everything going on, though, that was a bad idea.

Itll be you and me on this one, buddy, Dallion whispered to Ruby. Be ready.

Dallion rushed back along the corridor, then turned in the direction of the staircase. No sooner had he done so, than a figure rushed up to him.

Dal, a novice said. He was nondescript with a bland face Dallion didnt remember seeing. Dal, its me. Phoil. The novice added.

Phoil? Dallion took a step back. The boy had to be using defocus, but this was the first case of a disfocus item causing someone to shrink.

As if guessing Dallions suspicions, Phoil briefly removed his disfocus item, then put it on again. The experience lasted only a second, but was long enough for Dallion to see that it was indeed the large boy who had approached him.

Raven told me youll need help.

Great That was the last thing Dallion needed. Phoils skills were inadequate both in combat and in magic. There was no way hed be of any use if things got serious. Then again, having him try and help on his own would likely be much worse. Keep close and keep up, Dallion said as he rushed on.

Where are we going?

To see mage Enroy.

#### Chapter 718: Prison Realm

Purple symbols appeared on the walls and ceiling. All that was missing was the sound of sirens to make it clear that the building was under attack. Given how calmly the apprentices within had reacted to the destruction outside, Dallion thought they wouldnt make a big deal out of it. He was wrong.

Panic filled the corridors within seconds of the symbols lighting up. Mages and apprentices alike flooded the corridors, running and flying from one place to the next without a particular plan. Emotions of fear filled the space like soup.

Has this happened before? Dallion asked out of habit.

Only moments later did he realize there was no one to answer him. Looking at the chaos, though, it was safe to assume this was the first time.

Hurry up! He grabbed Phoil by the collar, pulling him through the crowd.

The large boy was doing his best to follow, though in reality he was as helpful as a waterskin tied to a horses tail. It was through a combination of quick reactions and frequent combat splitting that Dallion managed to pull the two of them through the flow of people on their way to the mages building.

Normally, he could be certain that Enroy would be there, but right now Dallion gave himself a fifty-fifty chance at best.

Without a doubt, it was rather convenient that the alarm had been triggered just now. Whoever was keeping an eye on him wasnt slacking.

Reaching Enroys building, Dallion stopped at the doorway, pulling Phoil next to him.

What will happen? he turned to the larger boy.

Huh? How Should I

Not you, Dallion hissed.

The building has been fully sealed, Phoil replied, though in a more authoritative voice. No one can go in or out. Only the Archmage and a few others can remove the protection seal.

The negative sides were obvious, but there was a positive one as well. At least now Dallion didnt have to worry about shardflies or enemy reinforcements. Sadly, it also meant there was no way to warn anyone on the outside.

Raven?

The young master is safely outside. Doesnt look like youll be joining him.

A bit of good news, at least.

Can Enroy break the seal?

There was a moment of confusion. Phoil scratched his chin, then his ear.

Hes the highest-ranking mage in the Learning Hall. He shouldnt be able to do such a thing, but knowing him, he might know a way out.

So, all we have to hope for is that hes here.

Dallion took a step towards the door. The air did not let him, solidifying like an invisible wall. Apparently, the alarm had triggered additional defenses around certain buildings. Either that or the mage had put them in place himself. If Dallion had his harpsisword, he could easily slice through the barrier. Sadly, the weapon wasnt with him. On second thought, maybe it was better this way. Using spark attacks would bring too much attention.

Splitting into five instances, Dallion drew his Nox dagger and struck the air barrier. The blade slid through without resistance, as if it were slicing silk. With one brisk action, Dallion slid the weapon down, then taking a few moments to look around took a step forward. The invisible barrier was no longer there.

Phoil, Dallion whispered as he opened the door.

The entrance hall was a lot different from what he remembered it. The place appeared barren, almost completely deprived of magic. One might think that the mage had abandoned it months ago.

Illusion, Ruby said.

Dallion nodded. With his perception level, he could see the small indecencies in the corners. Whatever the spell was, it had been cast hastily, probably at the very last minute.

Weve come for your help, mage Enroy, Dallion said. I know whats going on.

Nothing happened.

Are you sure hes not here? Phoil asked in his normal voice. Maybe he was called to

Hes here. Dallion replied. Thanks to his layer vision, he could see the shimmering beneath the illusion. I know the Academy is under attack, he said. And the person behind it.

The shimmering changed location. A ripple went through the entire scene, replacing the current decrepit state of the room to the glorious foyer it was supposed to be. Ten steps away, at the top of the staircase, stood Enroy. He dressed in a rather elaborate blue robe with blue designs. Despite that, Dallion could sense the fear emanating from him.

I tried to find Katka, but she wasnt in her room. Dallion took a step forward, but the moment he did, the mage pointed at him with his left index finger.

Stop! he said sharply. What do you think you know?

Someones using shadflies to destroy the Learning Hall, maybe even other parts of the Academy. In the meantime, someone inside is covering things up. Dallion paused. Was it the right thing to throw Adzorg under the bus? There was no actual proof that he was the one that had engineered everything, just suspicions and circumstantial evidence. I think the person behind it is Adzorg of Nerosal.

Adzorg? A mixture of surprise and relief emanated from the man. Youre sure?

No, but theres enough evidence to make me believe so. I have an echo of his inside my realm.

The mages fingers danced through the air, drawing dozens of runes at a time.

I have a blocking ring! Dallion raised his hand. For all the power that the mage had projected not too long ago, he didnt expect him to be so pathetic. Its okay. No one can hear us.

Of course it would be him. Hes come to get me for what I did to him!

Dallion couldnt say he was surprised. He still remembered the disapproval Nil had shown back when Alien had appeared in Nerosal. At the time, Dallion believed it to be nothing more than the echos general disdain of people who saw themselves as superior. Now, there was little doubt that the two had had issues before. What did Enroy have to do with things, though?

I think its a bit larger than personal vendetta, sir

Oh, its not just me. Hell have the entire Academy burn. I wouldnt be surprised if hes taken the chance to destroy the empire itself! The mage lowered his hand. He wouldnt dare when things were calm, but that idiot Gassil made things easy for him.

Normally, this was the point at which Dallion expected to hear a solution to the current problem. Solutions, though, were something that came from leaders. It was becoming more and more clear that Enroy was nothing but a manager, a middle manager.

Is there a way we could leave the building? Dallion asked after a few seconds. You must have the authority.

It was risky so openly using his music skills to instill a bit of calm and courage into the mage. The mans paranoia risked him mistaking that as an attack. Thankfully, he was too busy being terrified what Adzorgs plot might be to notice.

Theres a way. He hesitated.

Show us. If we get out, we can warn the Archmage, the emperor, and everyone else. Theyll believe the children of nobles, he added. All you have to do is make sure we get out somehow.

Presenting Phoil as their best hope was far from ideal. Sadly, in this instance, it wasn't the boy to blame. Dallion would have much preferred to find a cocky and arrogant mage capable of dealing with the storm of shardflies outside.

Follow me, Enroy said, heading to the private area of the building.

Dallion and Phoil quickly followed.

Statuettes and items filled Enroy's inner sanctum. For a moment, it almost seemed as if this was a teenagers action figure collection. Only those with the magic trait were able to see the power that was held within the room. Every item had far more magic than it was supposed to, often covered with patterns and symbols Dallion had never seen. Part of them he recognized: restraints.

I've got a key to pass through the seal, but it only works once. The mage took a jade statue of a frog with a purple gem on top. I'll need some of your magic for it to work on all of us.

My magic? Dallion instinctively took a step back.

Either that or your Moonstone. Don't worry, you won't lose it. When Adzorg set up the seals, he made them block anything with magic that tried to go outside. Yet even back then, he was thinking about himself. Any item with divine magic could easily pass when carried. I'll petrify you two, then trick the seal using your magic.

A solid plan, without a doubt. It did raise one question, though.

I didn't know that Adzorg put on the seals.

He was the bloody Archmage, why wouldn't he?

Adzorg was the Archmage?! Back when Dallion had seen Gassil's memory fragment, he had entertained the idea that Adzorg might have held such a position. The notion was quickly discarded, though. There was no way people could keep such a secret, or so he believed. Suddenly, so many things became clear. No doubt Hannah knew the truth. Dallion thought she held the old man in high regard because he was a guild captain. In fact, she knew precisely who he was.

How many secrets do you have, Hannah? Dallion wondered. There was no way to be certain.

Putting the frog statue in the pocket of his robe, Enroy started casting a ten-circle spell. Dallion went up to him, focusing on extending some magic out of his fingers. Just then, the impossible happened.

Phoil, who had been left to his own devices, rushed forward at a speed far greater than Dallion had seen him capable of. Before anyone could react, the tip of a blade emerged from the palm of his hand, thrusting forward.

In Dallion's head, time froze. His body and reaction traits weren't in condition to help him do anything. His high perception had allowed him to see the thing he had missed before. Among the rings on the child's fingers was one he had seen before, one he was supposed to be quite familiar with.

Vermillions tears, Dallion thought. The item made it possible to create a portal between realms. In some instances, it even allowed items to be hidden within someones personal realm. The items in question had to conform to certain requirements, but a sword made of silver glass did just that. Watching it pierce Enroys chest, Dallion remembered the conversation he had had with Nil not too long ago. The old echo had told him that such a sword was no better at killing mages than anything else. That was very much true. However, it was infinitely easier to conceal.

The mages face twisted in shock and disappointment as he was pierced. There were rectangles, no warnings, just one quick strike putting an end to his life.

Dallion burst into instances. Half of them attempted to move away from the boy as quickly as possible, while the rest waved the Nox dagger in his direction. Unfortunately, Phoil was already one step ahead. A large crystal sphere had somehow found itself in his left hand, and was not on a trajectory towards Dallion.

Before the tip of the dagger could reach his target, the crystal ball came into contact with one of Dallions instances.

### **ITEM AWAKENING**

All but one of Dallions instances vanished as he found himself in a small, windowless room. There was no furniture, decorations, or light sources other than a glowing blue rectangle.

**You are in the SPHERE prison realm.**

**Escape the realm to reclaim your destiny.**

Other than Dallion, there was one other person in the room. Or, more specifically, there was an echo of a person.

For a long moment echo and person looked at each other without saying a word. Finally, the echo spoke.

Well, this is a bit awkward, dear boy

Chapter 719: Prison Physics

It wont work, you know, Nil said.

At the other side of the room, Dallion kept on hacking at the wall with his Nox dagger. Each strike would leave an unmistakable mark on the transparent surface. Unfortunately, no matter the number of cracks, the wall refused to give in. Not even the smallest piece would chip off, making the otherwise devastating weapon as efficient as a crayon.

Dallion stopped, then slid his hand over the damaged area. The cracks seemed strangely smooth, as if they had been made centuries ago. It was almost as if the room was repairing itself despite the lack of magic symbols.

Its supposed to be like that, the old echo continued from his side of the room. Only a person from outside can let you out. Well, mostly someone from outside.

Why are you here? Dall asked, still refusing to look the echo in the eye. I still have my blocker on.

Because I created this place, dear boy. You can say its linked to me, which allows me to come and go as I choose. If youre asking why Im here now specifically, its for your benefit entirely.

Dallion didnt say a word.

I suspect something must have happened for you to have put it on, so I thought Id come help. Judging by your reaction, it might have been the wrong call.

It almost seemed that the echo was clueless regarding Dallions suspicions. It would take much to come up with a plausible story and continue to work together as before. However, that was a temporary measure, and besides that, Dallion knew the echo far too well to fall for such an obvious trick. Nil probably knew everything and what he didnt, he could guess. Phoil had been the real problem, though, completely blindsiding Dallion. The boy had always seemed suspicious, but all the time Dallion had been convinced he could take him on should it come to a confrontation. Apparently, that wasnt the case.

Whats this place?

Its a prison realm. The dwarves called it an oubliette. Of course, theirs were in real life. Thanks to their natural magic, they could build a cage of iron without doors or windows; dwarves could come and go as they please, while the other races would find themselves in an inescapable cell. One fine day someone decided to copy the principle and make an item out of it.

A realm to be imprisoned in for eternity without the option of dying. Dhermas former village chief had mentioned that during their fight. Dallion had found the concept slightly disturbing at the time. Hed never imagined hed experience it. Even now, his mind was refusing to accept the fate that awaited him.

You created this?

I created many things here. Even back when I was an apprentice, I had a knack for modifying realms. My expertise only grew from there.

Imprisoning people for infinity? Nice hobby.

I wasnt the one who invented them. I just rediscovered the process. There are a handful of mages capable of making them. The youngsters lack patience, the ambitious set their sights on something more important, which left me to create most of the prison items in the Academy and a few noble houses. Nil leaned against the wall. This is one of my early crude attempts. I suppose the boy found it in some closet somewhere. Its purpose was to help teach apprentices to create prison items of their own.

Insult was added to injury. The item that had imprisoned Dallion was a training prop?

For the really intricate ones, I was inspired by the principle of the Vermillion ring. Not only was the awakened mind captured in the realm, but his body as well. The echo attempted a smile. Now that youre in here, I guess I can tell you how this whole thing works.

Just stop! Dallion shouted. I know you did this! Dallion clenched his fists. You were the Archmage, the one who tried to open a link to the seven worlds and had his lab explode as a result.

Nil remained silent. There was not enough sarcasm in the world that would help him respond to such an accusation, especially since it was the truth. In truth, the fault was as much his as that of Aliens faction. The experiment was reckless, to say the least. As far as Dallion was concerned, the only thing worse than having the contraption blow up Archmages lab, was allowing it to remain intact.

You used me to stir things up here, Dallion continued. The visit to your friend, the vortex hunts, my time at the Learning Hall. It was all planned so you could get back at them. Well, you must be pleased with yourself.

A purple whirlwind surrounded Nil. Several seconds later, it was gone, presenting an entirely different person. The old aristocrat was gone, replaced by someone with the embodiment of authority a mage so powerful that at one point the entire Academy had trembled before him.

You're correct. I have used you for my purposes. In my mind, there never was any doubt that you'd become a hunter. Most otherworlders do. You, Jiroh, and Eury were supposed to gather what I had lost, and you did. However, I never even imagined you could obtain the magic trait. Once you did, everything fell into place. I'd no longer have to hunt down the scraps that were lost from my research building. Instead, I planned to use you to reclaim what's rightfully mine.

The echo took several steps towards Dallion. In his current form, he was a whole head taller, despite Dallion being in his normal size.

Even now, there are a few who are still loyal to me. None of them are of particular significance, but they are there and grateful to me. Yet, there's one thing you were wrong about. He narrowed his eyes. I wasn't the one who let out the shardflies, nor was I the one who imprisoned you here.

Every instinct told Dallion that the man was telling the truth. And still, he was uncertain whether he should believe him. Beyond a certain level, it became impossible to tell whether someone was lying, even while using awakened means.

If you didn't cause this, how was I to get your things back? Dallion asked.

By becoming an exceptional apprentice. You're already quite skilled. A mage your level, and with Moon magic within, it was all but certain that a high-ranking mage would be put in charge of your apprenticeship. Maybe the Archmage himself would take you on. From there, it would have been a simple thing to have you set up an intricate spell that would transport the horde of items to me.

So, Dallion wasn't wrong about Adzord, at least not entirely.

And if I had refused?

That's the beauty of it, dear boy. I wouldn't have told you. All you needed to do was go to specific spots at specific times. I would have done the rest.

Casting spells from my personal realm into the real world? Dallion couldn't help but be impressed.

I was exceptionally skilled once. They reduced a lot of my power when they banished me from here, but not all. I still have enough for a trick or two.



Youve been using me all along, Dallion said to himself. Then again, Dallion had also taken advantage of his knowledge. It was almost a true symbiotic relationship... of sorts.

If you made this, do you know a way out? Dallion asked.

Oh, everyone knows a way out. Theres no absolute prison, except one created by the Moons. Prison artifacts always allow escape. Its all a matter of odds: keep the awakened long enough so that first and hunger take their toll.

Dallion looked back at the wall behind him. There was no trace of the marks he had left there minutes ago. Clearly, that wasnt the way to go. He had to be smart about this, not rush at it with brute force.

How about challenging the guardian? he asked. Wont that get me out?

It would. Thats why I made sure that the prison items had no guardians. In order to make a prison item, one must use an artifact. And when I saw use, I mean use. The realm of the original sphere item is completely erased and something different emerges in its place. The more impressive the artifact, the stronger the prison.

Good thing you didnt get your hands on a world item, Dallion thought.

One more thing, dear boy. I know I usually accuse you of charging before thinking. In this case, you have to do just that. Theres one other thing that separates a prison item from a normal one: the passage of time. The echo drew a pattern in the air with the wave of the hand. The entire room lit up. Im not sure about the time ratio of this prison, but for every week here, a second might well pass in the real world. It might be a month or even a year, but a few seconds is all the boy out there needs to kill you. If you dont find a way to escape before then well, theres no point in discussing what would happen.

From that moment, the search began. While Nil couldnt remember the specifics of the prison realm he had built, he shared a few of the basics. Unlike what one might imagine, escaping from the realm didnt involve solving a puzzle or completing a challenge. The closest one could compare it to was safecracking. In order to return to the real world, Dallion had to shatter part of the realm, and the item with it. Brute force was as good a method as any, although prison realms were usually protected against such approaches. Magic also didnt seem to work. At one point, Dallion even tried a series of point attacks in the hopes he could drill a hole through a spot on the wall. Sadly, nothing worked.

You didnt leave any weak-spots. Dallion sat on the floor to rest a bit. Combat splitting had saved him the time to try to attack each individual spot in the room. Sadly, it hadnt done much to preserve his strength. How did you hide the magic threads?

Behind the walls, Nil explained. No illusions, from what I could remember. I just took advantage of the material. Its actually a wall of sand.

Doesnt look like sand. Dallion slid the tip of his Nox dagger along the floor.

Thats because youre thinking of the grain, not the wall. Have you tried writing on sand? Everything is quickly filled in as soon as you remove your finger. This is the same. Its not that the wall repairs itself, it just moves about to fill the space youve created.

That was rather interesting. If true, it also meant that Dallion wasnt causing any damage with his attacks, but rather displacing the material to other parts of the room.

Drawing a spell in the air, he tried to open a portal to the realm of water, as Harp had shown him. Yet no sooner had the portal formed that it flickered away without having any effect.

Portal spells dont work, Nil said. And neither would a vermillion rind. Not here, in any event.

Youve thought of everything.

Dear boy, its not difficult to consider the obvious ways out. Youll have to use some of your out of the box thinking if you want to get ahead.

Dallion did just that.

Without wasting a moment, he drew the heat symbol on one of the walls and stepped back. This time, the symbol flashed in a magnificent purple, instantly heating up the wall like a furnace.

You wont be able to melt it, Nil sounded slightly disappointed.

Thats not what I had in mind. Dallion drew another heat symbol, not too far away. This one, though, was made in such a way so as to extract heat, effectively freezing the part of the wall. I just need to harden part of it.

## Chapter 720: Head Smashing

There was nothing more satisfying than using a bit of high-school physics to get out of a bind. It would have been nice if simultaneously heating and cooling a wall were enough to help Dallion escape from the prison realm. Even Dallion wasnt that optimistic, although he wouldnt have had anything against a wall or two in the room collapsing. That didnt happen, although it proved something else he had heard from Earth: no material is fully homogeneous. Apparently, this applied to realms as well.

Thin lines appeared on the solid surface. Almost invisible to normal perception, they represented the boundary between hot and freezing. At first glance, the lines seemed to be of little significance, but given a bit of Earth knowledge and some awakened scholarly skills, one could see a pattern. The lines represented invisible seamsweaknesses in the monolithic material.

With a lot of patience, and even more combat splitting, Dallion sliced the walls along the lines. The material made an attempt to reform, just as Nil had explained it would. However, in one case, Dallion was able to slide a piece out, just like removing a manel from the case of a mobile phone. The block was no larger than a cube with a side of one foot, but it was enough to create a hole within the unbreachable wall.

Got you, Dallion thought.

With lightning reflexes, he tossed the block to the ground, then cast a spell summoning an ice cube in the open space. No sooner had he done so than the wall filled up any cracks, making the ice cube part of it. To be on the safe side, Dallion drew a few ice symbols on the ice.

Interesting approach, Nil said. Of course, I was just starting out back then. My better works don't have such obvious flaws.

Good thing they didn't use those, Dallion grumbled.

The block he had taken out had already started to fade away on the floor. Mere seconds after falling there, it already appeared to be part of the room again. Within minutes, it would seem like a loose tile. An hour after that, there would be no trace that anything had happened in the room at all.

Using his layer vision, Dallion tried to peek through the ice. As far as he could make out, there was a space beyond the wall. It was impossible to tell whether it was a separate room, a corridor, or just an air shaft of some sort. The important thing was that it was there.

What's your plan from here on? Nil asked.

Dallion glanced at the echo over his shoulder. The self-confident arrogance within him urged him to answer the question; his suspicions made him hold back.

I'm starting to think like a mage, Dallion thought.

I'll see either way. The echo shrugged.

Then why ask? Dallion went to the ice patch.

With a lot of luck, he could burn through the center of it and squeeze through just before the whole thing collapsed. It had its risks, but with a few instances, Dallion reckoned he could make it happen. Then again, based on the metaphor Nil had given him regarding the material of the realm, he didn't have to. While sand and dust actively filled any opening, they could easily be displaced.

Bit by bit, Dallion cast several dozen spells, each increasing the side of the cube by a tenth of an inch. Finally, when it was large enough, he went to the other side of the room, then rushed forward, charging at it head first.

All the action movies, back on Earth, clearly illustrated that head-butting was the strongest attack possible. When combined with a point attack, that actually proved true.

Dallion shattered through the block of ice, flying into the neighboring space. Even as he did, he could feel the wall close behind him in a desperate attempt to grab his feet like quicksand.

## **Head Smashing**

**(+2 Body)**

**That's one way to use your head. Never do it again, please.**

At least you have a sense of humor, Dallion said to himself as he stood up.

The new area resembled a corridor, although it had more openings than walls. Looking up and down, Dallion could see rectangular holes in the floor and ceiling. Everything continued to be completely bare, made of the same transparently-opaque material as the room had been. The only major difference was that this time there were a number of magic threads visible. Like cables, they went through the walls, spreading in all directions. None of them were very bright; it was unlikely Dallion would be able to increase his magic level by consuming them. Naturally, that didn't stop him from trying.

That would be a waste of time, dear boy. Nil appeared a few steps away. The benefits of being the prisons creator meant that he could appear in every part of the realm he wished.

Magic is stamina, Dallion said, placing his hand on the nearest wall. The magic within him spread out in the forms of hundred minute threads, twisting around the purple line. Katkas training had finally proved to be useful for something.

You cant eat or drink it. Stamina rarely is an issue in prison realms. Well, unless you happen to be caught in the prison item of an extremely sadistic noble.

So, the next part is a maze? Dallion pulled out the thread from the wall. It snapped in two. One part disappeared completely. The other remained attached to Dallions hand, continuing forward along the wall.

Thats part of it. Mind you, it wasnt intended to serve as a challenge. The whole point of this realm was to face prisoners with an unbreakable wall. Most would despair after a few days. After a few weeks, theyd even lose the will of escaping.

So, youve used this?

Of course I have. Ive even experienced it myself. Every good real builder must know the details of his craft, and that includes thinking like a person using it. Well, using might not be the correct word, everything considered. He slid a finger along the wall, then looked at it, as if inspecting for dust. It was also used on a few troublemakers. Rest assured, though, it takes for such punishment to be considered. Theres a far greater chance you might end up imprisoned at a nobles tea party.

So I keep hearing.

Its no surprise. As the saying goes, whats the use of all that power if you arent ready to use it?

There were a lot of things Dallion could say in that regard, but he chose not to. Instead, he continued along the corridor, consuming the magic thread as he did.

Given that he had managed to escape the windowless room in less than a day, Dallion had high hopes hed be out in six hours at most. Mazes, even three-dimensional ones, were his thing. He knew well that things in this realm would hardly be as they seemed, but at least he had a direction to follow: away from the room.

During the first few hours, hed constantly split into fifty instances, exploring all possible paths in the vicinity. After half a day, he decreased the number to ten. Five hours more, and he only kept one to act like a save-point of sorts.

Youre sure there are no creatures? Dallion asked, hoping for anything to distract him from the tedious boredom.

None whatsoever. Guardians would allow a way out, and cracklings would defeat the purpose. Still, I would recommend you checking if you happen to end up in another prison. There are other schools of prison realms and not all get rid of their guardians.

Thanks for the tip. Dallion had no intention of ever getting caught in something of the sort again. If the maze wasnt intended, why create it?

You're still ignoring the obvious. The maze is the guts of the realm carefully arranged and mathematically perfect combination of walls and openings that ensure the room walls deal with any attempts to destroy them quickly and efficiently. Going back to my sand example, you've seen the speed of sand. Eventually it would even out, given some external encouragement. The latticework of walls makes sure that happens sooner rather than later.

Wait. Dallion stopped. You made this?

I carved the concept, yes, the echo replied with a smile. It took me months back then. Several times I almost messed up. I was never gifted in splitting, so I couldn't resort to it.

Then you know the way out!

Dear boy Nil sighed. If I could tell you, don't you think I would have? Despite what you think of me, I have no desire to see you dead. Even from a pragmatic point of view, there's nothing I would gain from your death. I've become rather fond of you.

You just have more tasks you want me to do.

Let's assume that's true. You still need to be alive to do so.

Yea, right, Dallion thought.

How big is this place, at least?

Depends on your perspective. Definitely smaller than a world item. Larger than most common sphere items. That's not an easy question to answer.

Even now, after everything, the echo remained vague in its answers. Either he was playing a longer con, or something was restricting him from sharing what he knew. Most likely it was a bit of both. If Dallion wanted to get out of here, he had to rely on himself. For the moment, he was doing a good job following the magic thread. Also, thanks to his mind trait, he could see the part of the maze he'd gone through in his head. If one could take Nil at his word, which was no longer a given, Dallion was supposed to reach the end of the maze rather soon.

Half an hour later, Dallion arrived at a straight wall. This had to be it. Outside the initial room, there hadn't been a case of a wall lasting more than five steps without twisting in some direction. Just to be certain, Dallion continued walking along the wall for another twenty steps. There were no changes.

Is this the way out? he asked.

The echo, constantly following him a few steps behind, said nothing.

I'll take that as a yes, Dallion said to himself, and let go of the magic thread he was consuming. There was no point in keeping on with it. It had done his job, taking him to the outer layer. Now all he had to do was to break through.

Using his Nil dagger, Dallion sliced a scar on the wall. The mark shrank before his very eyes, completely disappearing in a matter of seconds. Clearly, the maze was doing a good job of distributing the material everywhere throughout the entire realm. In theory, it was supposed to be a

bit less efficient now, due to the magic thread Dallion had consumed, though not by a noticeable amount.

Has anyone escaped this realm before? Dallion asked.

Just one. Nil approached. The emperor. He took a liking to my work, so asked me if he could test it out. Im still clueless how he managed.

Damn. And I thought Id be the first.

Dallion drew a series of heating and freezing symbols on the nearby sections of the wall. It didnt take long for him to see the seams that appeared. Following the same practice as last time, Dallion sliced an opening, cast an ice cube spell in it, then expanded it enough to bust through.

Mentally, he had already prepared himself to continue the fight against Phoil from the point where they let off. Spending a bit over a day in the prison realm, virtually no time should have passed in the real world.

Splitting into instances, Dallion rolled on the floor, then did several three-sixty slashes with his Nox dagger. The only issue was that he didnt find himself in mage Enroys inner sanctuary, but rather in a small windowless room the same windowless room he had started from. The shame and dimensions were just as he remembered it, as was the glowing blue rectangle in the center.

As youve probably guessed, dear boy, its not the walls that make the prison. At least. Not just them.