

## Leveling up 721

### Chapter 721: Broken Trust

Even in his occasional moments of desperation, Dallion had to admire the construction of the prison realm. If things were different, he would have even asked to learn how to make them himself.

It turned out that the three-dimensional maze surrounded the room, while also being surrounded by it. The closest thing that Dallion could compare it to was the basic examples of four-dimensional space he had seen in science fiction movies back on Earth. From what he remembered, back then he had found the idea of tesseract and other impossible shapes rather cool. Naturally, he had never been locked in one.

For days Dallion would leave the room, exploring every corner of the maze. Each time, he'd follow a magic thread, consuming it in the process. Originally, his hope was twofold: try and find a hidden exit that Nil had overlooked or, failing that, weaken the realm by depriving it of magic. Sadly, neither seemed to work. The prison remained just as impenetrable as before.

Quite an interesting flaw you've found, Nil said. At the time, I didn't think anyone would get beyond the room.

Little good it's done me, Dallion thought. It was tempting to give up, but like in life, giving up wouldn't solve the problem.

If it's any relief, no one made it this far, the echo added. Other than the emperor.

Wow. Thanks, Nil. Second best first loser.

Does being in a foul mood help?

Dallion leaned back against the wall. There was no denying that the echo was correct. However, that hadn't stopped Nil from being in a foul mood all the times Dallion messed up in the past. Like many things, advice was highly subjective.

Caught by the perfect storm, Dallion whispered. If he didn't have his blocking ring on, there was a chance that someone in his realm would be able to help him out. And the emperor never mentioned how he escaped?

I wasn't exactly in a position to ask. You must remember it was my first time seeing the man up close. I handed him the prison item, activated it, then he smiled and handed it back.

Sounds like spellcraft. Does the emperor have magic?

Such questions aren't particularly healthy, even here.

How much worse can it get? If I don't get out fast, I'll die anyway.

True, but what will happen if you manage to get out? You've seen what it was like to be chased by a countess. Imagine what will happen if you get the emperor pissed. Neither I, the Academy, not even the Order of the Seven Moons will be able to protect you.

I'll take my chances. It's not like I have anything else to do.

Hesitation covered the echos face. Even as a copy of Adzorg, Nil was displaying a remarkable degree of caution. Being a former archmage it was very likely that he had made a Moon vow to serve the emperor while he was alive. Not even banishment would be enough to free him from such a vow.

Im not certain, he admitted. There have been many mages in the emperors line. Some even passed through the Academy, though thats become rare. The imperial family takes care of its own. Even most of the tutors from branching imperial families. One has to be exceptionally skilled to be summoned otherwise.

The echo cast a spell. A light statue of a supernaturally tall man appeared in the room. His head was almost touching the ceiling, indicating he had to be well above seven feet tall. The design of the clothes was masterful, though nowhere as intricate as Dallion would have expected for someone of such stature. Then again, this was only Nils recreation of the man.

It is believed that the emperor has mastery of all skills, Nil said. Some have their doubts, although they would never admit it in public.

Dallion nodded. This probably was Nils way of saying that Adzorg was uncertain of the fact.

However, that doesnt matter. If he were weak, the Archdukes would have allied and taken him down.

According to the history scrolls Dallion had read in his library ring, there had been a similar attempt centuries ago. The five archdukes at the time had attacked the emperor in his very throne room, attempting a coup. Details were lacking, but the emperor continued to rule afterwards, while the nobles had had a change of heart, becoming his most loyal supporters.

Alright. Dallion stood up. The fact that he had escaped meant that there had to be a way. Nil, if you were trapped in this realm now, would you be able to escape?

With my current level of magic? Probably.

Dallion felt more arrogance in the answer than fact. Still, the fact that the echo had chosen to remain in the realm made him think that he had a shot at it. Once more, he examined the walls. By now he had left the room so many times that he knew the locations of the invisible seams by heart. In theory, he could try breaking up the room in separate pieces in the hope it would crumble. It wasnt much to go on, but it was all Dallion had.

The entire room was quickly covered in heat symbols. Ignoring the discomfort this caused in enclosed space, Dallion proceeded to cast a series of ice spells, sliding them between parts of the walls like plaster between bricks. Once the walls were done, Dallion did the same to the floor and ceiling.

A few grains of glass-like sand crumbled from the corner of the room, falling to the floor.

Well, it was a good attempt, dear boy, Nil said, with an encouraging pat on the shoulder. Get some rest and tomorrow you might find a better his voice trailed off. Dallion had gone to the corner.

This wasnt supposed to happen, he bent down and picked up the grain of sand.

There was no magic in it. By all accounts, it was just a standard fragment of quartz-like material. In the eyes of Dallion, though, it was a lot more. Somehow, he had managed to cause the material to lose part of its self-restoration capabilities.

The walls don't make the prison, he said slowly.

Nil had been wrong. Rather, he had purposefully omitted quite a lot. Was it a split up? Or did the echo really want to help Dallion despite the imposed restrictions? If they were ever going to meet again in the real world, there'd be a lot of things to discuss.

Using his usual method, Dallion went back into the maze. This time, instead of wandering off, he created three dozen echoes and started drawing heat symbols everywhere in the vicinity. It didn't take long for him to find the areas of weakness there as well.

Thought of something? The echo appeared behind him.

Yep. Dallion created another ice cube and put it in a segment of the wall. And I have you to thank.

Im glad to hear that. Hopefully, that means that things will get back to what they were before?

Hardly, Dallion thought, but didn't say a thing.

Hours passed. Icifying the maze was a lot more difficult than one would expect. Dallion had no illusions that the breakout would be easy, but with every segment he modified, he'd see evidence that he was on the right track. There always were small things: grains of sand, a scratch on the floor that would remain, a faint grinding sound coming from nowhere in particular. Adzorg had done a good job in making the walls be both magic source and conductor. The amount of energy involved had to be astronomical. Creating a buffer between the segments was enough to introduce resistance to the system, and with enough resistance, it was inevitable that the whole thing would collapse. From here on it was all a race between Dallion and Phoel; time moved a lot faster within the prison realm, but there was a lot that needed to be done to ensure an escape.

Day after day, Dallion and his echoes toiled on, moving in circles round the room. If his theory was cored, he had to make sure that all the segments in the immediate vicinity were modified before moving on.

You need to rest. Nil approached. Even with your mind trait, maintaining so many echoes takes its toll.

Ill be fine. Dallion wiped the sweat off his forehead. Of everyone present, he was the only one sweating. Thankfully, the headaches hadn't started yet.

I know you think that the sooner you get out of here, the better off you'd be, but keep in mind that escaping is not your true goal.

Eh? Dallion glanced over his shoulder.

Your main goal is to defeat the boy. If he finishes you off once you get out, it would all have been for nothing, not to mention slightly ironic.

Im not a single digit, Nil. Im used to reality shifts.

That might be, but you've always known when you were returning to the real world. This time it would be different.

I've been ejected before. Dallion got back to drawing symbols.

I'm aware that every day counts, but you could spare a few hours, especially with all those echoes doing your job for you.

Fatigue and hunger had their say, convincing Dallion that he could afford a short rest. Finishing the wall segment he started, he then sat on the ground and closed his eyes.

The echo joined him.

What's your plan once you get out? Nil asked.

So, you're admitting I'm going to get out? Dallion suppressed his smile. Warn the archmage.

Is that wise?

You think he's involved?

The current archmage is an idiot with no courage and a complete lack of imagination. All his adult life he wanted to get the post and now that he has it, the only thing he's worried about is someone taking it from him. Nil let out an annoyed snort. He might even reward you for helping him. No doubt you'll earn a new shiny title or two. Perfectly useless, but very impressive in noble circles.

Doesn't sound like you approve.

What I want isn't the topic here. I'd rather see that traitor burn, but I won't be the one who has to make the choice.

Are you suggesting what I think you are? Dallion wondered.

History always rewarded those who chose the winning side. Did Nil believe that getting rid of the archmage would be better for the Academy? More importantly, was there a chance that it could happen? Everything had been meticulously planned so far, so it wouldn't be without reason. Yet, would Dallion be welcome to join that side, even if he wanted to? Or maybe the old echo was suggesting something far worse.

You have to defeat the boy, Nil continued. That much is a given. What then? And please be specific.

I leave the Learning Hall.

Yes?

I go to the

How do you deal with the shardflies? Not to mention the actually powerful mages who are behind it all? Maybe you're skilled enough to defeat an apprentice. Maybe. Nil wagged his finger. Not a mage, though.

Dallion couldn't answer.

But lets say that you take advantage of the chaos and manage to find an ally. Maybe you even crush the coup. What then? The Academy wont just let you leave, not after everything thats happened. Youll have to join a faction with enough pull to gain that privilege.

What does it matter? Dallion didnt like the way this was going. Theyre a thousand things that could happen. Let me deal with the most obvious before I have to worry about

Are you ready to forsake Euryale? Or the Academy? Its very possible that youll be forced to do both, and nothing in your incredibly fortunate life has prepared you for such a choice!

All of Dallions echoes stopped working. They could feel the whirling of emotions within him.

You look upon life as if it were a game. True, youve gone through some extremely unpleasant situations that many havent, but deep down, you still act as if nothing can harm you. I had hoped that going beyond level fort would teach you how to plan better, but youre still incapable of looking two steps ahead. You see parts of the big picture, but only deal with what is thrown your way, never directing events one way or another. Was it your idea to form the alliance and get the Moonstone? Did you choose what classes to go to, or were they chosen for you? For that matter, did you even choose to obtain magic? The echo took a deep breath. Even now youre so focused on getting out of your immediate mess that you arent focusing on what would follow.

Dallion stood up. Without a word, he turned around and got back to wedging ice in the maze walls.

Is that it? Nil crossed his arms. Dont you have anything to say?

I dont trust you, Nil. The words finally left his mouth. Not anymore. Ill find a way out of the prison realm, then out of the Learning Hall. What I do after that is my business!

## Chapter 722: Realm Escape

There was no rationale for pain. Dallion was fully aware that Nil had been manipulating him for centuries and more, and yet refusing to his face made him feel as if hed lost a friend. It was easy to claim that it was the lingering effects of emotional blackmail, the overall stress he was subjected to, or some other rational reason. At the same time, Dallion knew all that to be a bunch of crap. The reason Dallion was feeling what he was had nothing to do with the echo or even the mage behind him; the pain came because in a way Dallion couldnt honestly say he was any different. Several of his main skills were based on manipulation. Every time he used music skills or engaged the abilities of his empathy trait, he was making people, animals, and guardians do what he wanted. The degree varied, but there was never any doubt what he was doing. And the most absurd thing of it for the most part, no one seemed to care all that much. It was the fight with the Star that had changed everything.

Hes gone, one of Dallions echoes approached him. Back to your realm, if I had to guess.

Dallion didnt respond.

We all know its messed up, but you know such things happened in this world. Even before you learned, he was the archmage you had your suspicions. Did you think hed be any different from the other beings of power youd come across? Two of them tried to take over the world in the past.

No, I suppose not, Dallion said to himself.

He was right about one thing, though. You need to rest. We can pause for a few hours so you can take a nap.

No. Dallion briskly turned around. No naps. Ill just sit down for a bit.

Right. Better than nothing, I guess. Dallions echo shrugged. Just set your thoughts in order. Would be annoying if Nil ended up being right.

Dallion sat on the floor and drew a light symbol. It wasnt strong, just enough to provide a calming blue glow.

Oh, and Im sure Eury doesnt see you that way, the echo added.

What way? Dallion instinctively asked.

Like Adzorg.

While it was nice to be reassured by someone, it would have been better if that someone wasnt an identical copy of himself. Distance was starting to play a part to the point that he considered her a memory. Sometimes the memories would stir him to action, but all it took was another event to make him forget just as much.

Guess you were right about that as well, Nil, Dallion thought. If he wanted his relationship to last, he was going to have to work on it, and that meant leaving the Academy. Either that or

## **REALM COLLAPSED**

A green rectangle appeared.

## **REALM BREAKER**

**(+5 MIND)**

**You have successfully destroyed a prison realm from within. Just be mindful that doesnt make you unstoppable, just persistently annoying.**

The suddenness kept Dallion from focusing on the unexpected achievement. Instead, he mentally prepared to return to a fight he had started weeks ago.

Less than a second had passed in the real world; Phoilor rather the symbiotic echo within him had started the final attack, though he hadnt had enough time to complete it.

Splitting into dozens of instances, Dallion leapt back. Not the best move, considering his enemy had an advantage at a distance. In a sword versus dagger fight, it was always better to remain as close as possible. However, Nils persistent warnings in the prison realm had managed to cause enough self-doubt for him to err on the side of caution.

Crystal fragments fell to the ground. The rectangles of moments ago hadnt exaggerated.

Both sides instantly realized what had happened, then reacted appropriately: Phoilor spun around, doing multiple circular arcs with his sword. Meanwhile, Dallion pulled off the blocker ring from his finger.

Ruby, Gem, attack from a distance! he ordered. Just then, Phoil burst into instances. No longer was it the meager three copies he used in the past. Over fifty instances of the boy appeared in the room, filling it completely.

Caught by surprise, Dallion tried to force split the situation, but his opponent countered. The mental force was far greater than Dallion had felt so far, almost as if he were facing a dragon. Someone with greater ability was attempting to force their version of reality. The tug of war continued for half a second, resulting in a stalemate. When reality hit, Phoil and Dallion were at different ends of the room, neither gaining the upper hand.

So, the hunter knows tricks, Phoil said. I knew I should have gone for you first.

You aren't a mage, Dallion said, keeping six instances at the ready. Who are you?

The large boy just smiled, then burst into instances again and charged forward.

Ruby attempted a wave of wing slashes, but all of them were easily evaded. The echo controlling Phoil was exceptional at acrobatics as well as attack. Based on his movements, Dallion estimated him to be in his seventies, at least, possibly more.

Blades clashed. The Nox dagger, usually capable of shattering objects on touch, failed to cause even a crack on the shimmering surface of the sword. It seemed that the material had a few other added bonuses, which both Nil and Onda had neglected to mention.

Parrying the first attack, Dallion twisted his body, attempting a high kick at the side of the other's face. The attack didn't land. With lightning reflexes, Phoil let go of the sword, blocking the kick. Immediately after, he grabbed hold of Dallion's ankle and took a step back.

The approach was both clever and perfectly executed. Even experienced fighters would have lost their footing, which was why Dallion didn't even bother to do anything about it. Rather, he twisted his entire body, kicking Phoil in a series of different spots in five separate instances. In three of the cases, the results were less than desirable. In the remaining two, he managed to force his opponent to let go.

Ruby quickly intervened again, sending out a wing slash between the two. The attack hid Enroy's dead body, while at the same time preventing Phoil from charging forward again.

You're a noble, Dallion said, using his music skills to affect his enemy with as much slowness and weight as possible. Are you a count? A countess?

You're so full of yourself. The other smirked. You think a count would waste his time on you?

Wouldn't be the first time.

Dozens of Dallion's instances attempted to attack from different sides. All of them were constantly pushed back by Phoil's own.

I don't have to kill you, the large boy said. Just to keep you here.

The words sounded almost exactly like the platypain Dallion had faced recently.

So, I can still ruin your plans? Dallion took a step forward with his anchor instance.

Some think that. Phoil slashed the air with his sword. As he did, Dallion felt a slight tingling in his ears. Music only when no one knows you're using it. More instances of the boy emerged, rushing forward.

Line attack! Dallion thought, doing a horizontal slice.

Any reasonable person knew that performing such an attack indoors was a terrible idea. The entire structure risked crumbling, say nothing of the dozens if not hundreds of casualties on the outside. Being in a mages room changed things. For a split second, purple symbols appeared as they shined through the surface illusions that covered every part of the building. Before the line of destruction had a chance to form, a loud bang erupted, everyone was tossed right at the walls behind them. Even Ruby was thrust up, drilling into the ceiling like a razor blade into cheese.

The air was knocked out of Dallion's lungs as his back slammed against the hard surface. Waves of pain and suffocation swept through him, almost making him black out. The force disappeared, letting him peel onto the floor, gasping for air.

At the other side of the room, Phoil hadn't been so lucky. His awakened nature had let him survive the encounter with the wall, though unconscious. Only the faint noise coming from him told Dallion that the boy remained alive.

Gem, can you heal him?

Err, okay, the aetherfish replied. Unlike Ruby, the familiar hadn't been particularly useful during the fight, spending most of the time observing in utter confusion. Fortunately, healing magic was something it was fully capable of.

Dallion forced himself up. He was in considerable pain, though nothing he couldn't handle thanks to his high body trait. Limping slightly, he made his way to Enroy's body. There was no question that the man was dead, pierced through the torso, then suffering additional wounds during the fight between Phoil and Dallion.

Sorry about this, Dallion whispered. Barely knew the man, and definitely didn't like him, but didn't want such an outcome.

Casting a spell to summon a blanket, Dallion covered the body, then went to the unconscious Phoil. With him rendered unconscious, he posed no threat. The echo controlling him had been formidable indeed, but all the skill couldn't compensate for low traits.

Bending down, Dallion took the Vermillion ring off the boy's finger, then retrieved the silver glass sword. The weapon felt like a natural fit, as if it belonged to him.

What's the way out? Dallion asked as he used his own Vermillion ring to transport the sword to his realm. Nil? he added.

*There are emergency exits scattered throughout the building. All you need to do is find one and use a specific unlock spell. Alternatively, you can use a Vermillion ring to pass through.*

That was interesting. So, Phoil had come prepared in more ways than one. His goal had been to kill Enroy and Dallion, then leave. That was reassuring; it meant that there was a way to avoid the shardflies outside.



You alright, Ruby? Dallion glanced at the ceiling.

The shardfly was trembling with such speed that it was outright vibrating. Gradually, its wings moved back out of the ceiling, allowing the creature to re-emerge.

Anything broken?

No, the insect said, even if it were plainly visible that his wings were chipped in several places. Flying along a spiral, it made its way to Dallions shoulder.

Lux will take care of you. Dallion then retrieved his blocker ring from the floor. Gem, keep him alive. If he or anyone tries to attack you, vanish.

Okay, boss, the aetherfish replied.

Gritting his teeth to best ignore the pain that came with every step, Dallion left the room, then the building altogether. The situation in the corridor was just as bad as he remembered it. A few elder mages were making an attempt to forcefully impose order, but even they found it difficult with the number of panicking apprentices. This complicated things somewhat. If Dallion tried to run, there was every chance he'd be spotted and stopped. To avoid this, he calmly made his way towards the staircase section, keeping as closely as possible to the nearby buildings.

His effort paid off. Although slow and painful, the trip off the floor wasn't interrupted. Once on the first floor, things went a lot more smoothly. At one point, he even had an apprentice shout at him to hurry up and get back to his room. Since that was Dallions intention, he complied, forcing himself to run as quickly as possible.

If you keep this up, you'll faint in a minute, Nil said.

A minute is all I need, Dallion hissed through his teeth. He was almost at his door. His vision had gotten slightly blurry, and yet he pushed on. Collapsing in the corridor was out of the question. A concerned mage, or apprentice, or even a well-meaning fellow novice was enough to end his chance of leaving the Learning Hall.

Gripping the handle, Dallion opened the door and stumbled inside.

Lux, he managed to say. Heal me.

Chapter 723: Desperate Boosting

## **MAJOR HEAL**

**Your health has been increased by 50%**

Dallion thought he saw a red rectangle hover before his eyes. After he blinked, it was gone. Still, he was starting to feel a lot better. The dartblade was on his chest, surrounded by a layer of blue flames.

Are you okay, boss? Lux asked from within his realm.

This wasn't a question that could be answered right away. For several seconds he lay there, trying to figure out if all the pain had left his body. Then and only then he stood up. The door remained open a few steps away. It was pointless closing it at this point, so Dallion didn't. Rather, he proceeded to collect all his gear and belongings.

Back into the fray? The armadil shield asked. I have to hand it to you. You manage to make even school life dangerous and exciting.

Go me, Dallion replied. He would have very much liked to say it had been fun. Sadly, hed be half lying. Is Ruby okay?

Dallion looked at his shoulder. The shardfly was there, as usual, only now the chips on its wings were gone. On the surface, all the damage seemed to have been healed, and yet there was an unmistakable feeling of bitterness emanating from him.

Nil, wheres the nearest exit? Dallion asked.

Nearby, the echo replied.

Is there one close to the novice administration building?

*Yes, I supposed there is.*

Good.

Running the corridor, along with a bit of combat splitting, Dallion made his way to the administration building. On two occasions he was briefly stopped by an apprentice, determined to send him back to the safety of his room. A bit of music skills, and the situation was quickly resolved in Dallions favor.

Lock, Dallion whispered at the buildings door. Is anyone inside?

Naa, the lock guardian replied. Everyone rushed out somewhere. No ones here now. Want inside?

Sure.

Yaa. A faint click followed.

Making sure no one was looking his way, Dallion entered.

*Creature cages are near the entrance*

, Nil said as Dallion went up the wooden staircase. *Riddles are further away.*

Good advice. Dallion intended to deal with creaturesthey were quick to deal with, especially now that hed obtained some practical spellcrafting experience.

The warehouse room was just as packed as before. One had to admire the amount of vortex cages the Academy had. The question where they were getting them remained, but for another time.

I can only boost up to level twenty? Dallion asked as he picked up a purple cube.

*That is the general idea. From twenty onwards, youll need the real thing.*

Dallion moved a cube to an empty area of the room and put it on the floor. Done, he placed his hand on top and extended his magic.

## **VORTEX CAGE LEVEL 1**

The cube extended, surrounding him with glowing purple.

**You are in a VORTEX CAGE.**

**Defeat the guardian to ABSORB the vortex.**

**You have 20 minutes before the VORTEX becomes too weak to absorb.**

A smaller version of the aether lion emerged a short distance away. Last when Dallion had faced such a creature, it had taken the combined effort of four people to defeat the monster. Of course, that guardian was linked to the realm of a Moon.

The harpissword appeared in Dallions right hand. Without hesitation, he slashed the air, letting out a series of spark infused line attacks. The fingers of his left hand blurred as he cast the Iksas aether projectile spell.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

The vortex guardian barely had time to react. Its fur glowed with symbols, casting a series of aether shields in an attempt to save it from the savage attacks.

The first two line attacks sliced through the protective barriers as fast as they appeared. The third one passed through, striking the creature.

### **FATAL STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 500%**

A red rectangle emerged. It was shortly followed by half a dozen more as projectiles bombarded the unfortunate lion. By rough calculations, the damage was supposed to be sufficient to earn Dallion the win. However, he didnt take the chance, dashing forward and engaging in a multi-attack. Dozens of strikes pierced through the lions fir.

### **AGGRAVATED STRIKE**

**Dealt damage is increased by 100%**

More rectangles stacked up, joined shortly by a purple one.

**AETHER LION has been defeated.**

For half a second, Dallion continued attacking until his conscious self told him it was time to stop. The guardian had been defeated. The only reason it hadnt vanished was because of the exception magic granted.

Nothing personal. Dallion took a step back.

The lion growled before unraveling into a cluster of magic threads. The rest of the vortex cage followed, streaming towards Dallion. All that was left not was for him to consume them.

### **MAGIC ABSORBED**

**Your magic trait is now 19**

A wave of warmth and strength filled Dallion, as the new magic merged with his. There was no amount of energy drinks back on Earth that could come anywhere close to what he was

experiencing now. In the back of his mind, there remained a voice warning him not to get used to the high. It was quickly ignored, as Dallion rushed to grab the next vortex cage by the door.

Suddenly, the room shook violently. More than a rumble, it felt as if an outside force was trying to tear the Learning hall apart. Dallions first thought was that he might have caused this. Logic and rationality quickly expunged the thought. More likely than not, the shardflies in the area had started attacking everything in sight. The learning hall, despite its magic defenses, remained a building, and as such was a prime target.

You better hurry up, Nil stated the obvious.

How long does the building have? Dallion leapt to the empty spot.

*The Hall is fine, but if things get any worse outside, you wont be able to escape even if you leave the building.*

Dallion activated the second artifact.

### **VORTEX CAGE LEVEL 1**

**You are in a VORTEX CAGE.**

**Defeat the guardian to ABSORB the vortex.**

**You have 20 minutes before the VORTEX becomes too weak to absorb.**

Initially, when the vortex formed, there was nothing inside. A sense of dread swept through Dallion. He had no time for riddle challenges, and waiting twenty minutes for the trial to be over was out of the question. Thankfully, a guardian soon appeared in the form of an aether shardfly.

Gleam? Dallion asked, unable to proceed with the attack.

The creature was hiding its info box, adding just enough doubt that it could be a version of Dallions former familiar. The seed of doubt kept Dallion from attacking. Splitting, he approached it with one instance. The shardfly didnt react, flapping its wings gently in the air, waiting. Its appearance was a lot more delicate than the standard shardfly, as if it were created from fine layers of purple light. Eight wings slapped in a complicated sequence, just enough to keep it in the air.

Its not her, Ruby said from Dallions shoulder.

I know. Dallion reached for the creature. But I need to be certain.

Just before his finger came into contact with the being, the aether shadfly sprung into action. One of its wings grew ten times its usual size, then slashed through an instance of Dallion, cleanly severing his fingers, arm, and head as if it were a laser beam.

### **COMBAT INITIATED**

The pain only lasted for a moment, but it made it perfectly clear that this wasnt the creature he hoped it would be.

Splitting again, Dallion charged forward. Using the approach of his previous fight, he cast a projectile spell, while slashing through the creature with a spark attack.

To his astonishment, the attack succeeded, slicing the shardfly in two. However, no red rectangle emerged.

Illusion, Ruby said, darting off Dallions shoulder.

Another two instances of Dallion were shredded to pieces before Ruby engaged in the invisible enemy. Red and purple sparks filled the air.

One moment Ruby was fighting nothing, the next, a second shardfly with amethyst wings appeared. No longer the aethereal Dallion had initially seen, the creature resembled Ruby, though with slightly prolonged wings. Looking closely, Dallion could see hundreds of minuscule mana threads all over its wings. While engaged in a wing fight with Ruby, the guardian constantly attempted to create a spell, only to have the symbols systematically slashed midair.

Holy crap! Dallion thought.

Despite all his skills, spells, and experience, he remained hopeless against creatures capable of creating high-level illusions. If it werent for Ruby, there was a very real possibility that he would have lost the fight. That wasnt the case, but now Dallion was presented with a new problem. During the fight, the guardian had changed appearance, becoming a copy of Ruby.

Just great, Dallion hissed.

He didnt think hed have an issue killing any one of the shardflies, or even both of them. However, there was no way of telling which was Ruby and which not. If he were able to maintain combat splitting for more than a few seconds, maybe he could try killing either and then waiting to see which was which. In theory, it was possible he found out before that, but Dallion had no intention of taking the risk.

It was an interesting stalemate. Neither Ruby nor the guardian had any advantage. Meanwhile, Dallion was free to perform any attack he wished, but could do so; to top it all, if he were to order Ruby to disengage, that would give the aether shardfly the chance to cast spells again.

Of all the creatures, why did it have to be this one, Dallion clenched his fist.

In his mind, he went through dozens of options. Filling the vortex cage with water was risky, since it could affect Ruby as well. In equal fashion, using Ravens magic draining spell was also dangerous. Using Cheskas chain magic sounded like a passable option, but shardflies were the last creatures that would capture.

That remains one of your great weaknesses, Nil said. You have no way of fighting illusions on your own. It was fine while Gleam was with you. Without her, though

What about the spell you taught me?

*Try it if you like. It wont work. The creatures spell is too intricate. If your magic trait was a dozen levels more, I could teach you a spell that would help you out, but not at your current level.*

Harp? Dallion asked, only to get no answer. He didnt feel her being mad or even upset at him. Her silence, rather, suggested that she agreed with Nil on this point: Dallion had to figure out a way to shield his vulnerability and do so on his own.

The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became he'd never be able to distinguish between the creatures. Illusions at this level changed reality itself. Although, there was one thing that the vortex guardian was unable to change.

Nox, I'll need your help, buddy, Dallion thought. I won't lie to you. It's going to hurt a lot. Will you help me out?

Okay, the crackling replied. There was no trace of annoyance or rebellion in his voice. When it came down to important things, Nox remained unwavering, just as he was back when Dallion had first obtained him.

Thanks. Dallion pulled out the Nox dagger and struck the floor.

The entire vortex cage trembled as black cracks formed around the point of impact. Simultaneously, flickers ran up the dagger, inflicting an equal amount of pain and damage to the crackling as well. Dallion felt the pain pulse within his realm, and yet Nox didn't make a sound.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion struck the floor again. The cracks spread until an entire quarter of the floor was affected.

Can you handle one more? Dallion asked. It'll be the last.

Hey, it's me, the crackling said with his typical confidence.

That's what I thought. Thanks, Nox. Dallion struck the floor.

Beneath the cracks, several strands of magic snapped.

Chapter 724: Key Spell

Hairline cracks covered on one of the shardflies, followed by a grain of unease within it. The moment he saw it, Dallion reacted. Faster than lightning, three instances leapt at the target. Three blades struck it, all shattering the creature in two.

## **TERMINAL STRIKE**

**Damage dealt has been increased 1000%**

The fragments of the defeated shardfly shifted color, switching to purple.

**AETHER SHARDFLY has been defeated.**

A purple rectangle emerged, confirming Dallion's victory. He had gotten the right one. This had been expected; the guardian had been linked to the vortex cage, as any guardian was linked to its object, but still Dallion felt a weight fall off his shoulders.

The standard process followed. Within seconds, the vortex was drained into Dallion, leaving him and Ruby back into the warehouse room.

## **MAGIC ABSORBED**

**Your magic trait is now 20**

You okay Nox? Dallion asked. A subtle meow indicated that the crackling puma was well enough. Ruby? Dallion turned to the shardfly.

Yep. Came the answer.

Thanks for the assist. I owe you.

Ruby didnt respond, flying back to his usual place. Only the slight decrease in the moodiness emanating from him indicated he was somewhat pleased.

The room shook again, lasting for a full five seconds. Whatever was happening on the outside was getting worse.

Dallion glanced at the vortex cages. There was enough magic to add ten new skills to each of his familiars, at least. In a matter of minutes, he would be able to boost Gem and Lux considerably and in turn gain an advantage in any upcoming fight.

You dont have to, Harp said. You have everything you need to win.

Are you sure? Dallion still hesitated. This was his only chance to access this much free magic.

Yes.

Dallion laughed. Once again, life was offering him a choice between what he needed and what he wanted. There was a time when he thought that being strong would give him the option to choose both. Now that he had close to twenty times the level since then, Dallion found that little had changed; only the stakes were higher.

Taking one moment to recite the names of the Moons, Dallion rushed out. New symbols had emerged on the walls of the administrative building, shining through the solid texture.

Nil, will the space distortion hold? Dallion leapt down the staircase.

*There are enough constructs and artifacts to ensure that. Itll be easier to destroy the building itself, which is what I think theyre doing.*

What about the other mages in the Academy? Dallion asked. Are politics so important that theyll sit by and watch?

Most definitely, but I fear you have larger worries. The echo paused. Go to the main admin building. The best exit is there.

Why not have one here? There was no point in keeping a low profile now. Dallions instincts rushed along walls, avoiding the corridor crowd and flying apprentices. The panic had reached new heights and the meager attempts at order had been fully abandoned.

*This was a common room during my time. Whyd anyone bother to put an exit here? And before you ask, all exits are on the first and top floors.*

Hardly a good decision. Adzorg probably never considered it possible anyone would attack the Academy. The exits werent there to give him a way out, but a way in.

Is the spell difficult?

*Yes, but nothing you cant handle. Ill show you when you get here.*

You mean there?

*Yes. And here.*

The blue building was refreshingly empty when Dallion got there. It was also locked. A bit of negotiation with the lock guardian, and an appropriate spell taught by Nil, Dallion made his way inside.

Immediately, he closed and locked the door behind him. Next, he went to the center of the lobby and looked down at the floor. Nothing was there, not even the standard magic symbols that were present in the rest of the Academy structure. That was the point. Adzorg had made sure to cover the escape locations with several layers of illusions, each as real as the last. Without knowing the precise spot, no one would ever notice. Then came the hard part.

### **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

Reality shifted. Only one person was waiting for Dallion in his realm.

Hello, Dal, Nil said in a calm fashion. Not a single emotion was visible within him. Surprisingly, he was wearing his usual clothes.

No archmage outfit? Dallion asked.

Im not the archmage anymore. It doesnt matter that the buffoon that holds my office isnt either. The resentment in his voice was unmistakable. So, lets get on with it. He pulled up his sleeves. This is more difficult than your garden variety of spells, so youll have to pay attention. The order of the symbols matters, as does the speed at which they are drawn. Thats the only way of keeping spells hidden. I suggest you come up with your own spell signature at some point, otherwise every average mage will be able to copy your spells as you have been doing.

Why? Dallion asked.

Why? The echo arched a brow. Why what?

Why are you helping me? Why use me to begin with?

The left side of Nils mouth curved up in a semi-smile.

Finally, asking some of the right questions. I see why the Moons like you so much. Each time you become desperate, you grow further. If you manage to grow without the constant external pressure you could have ruled the world.

Like was hadrdly the word Dallion would use. The Moons had demanded a lot of him, and while they had without doubt helped him considerably, they had also cursed him for a reason he remained unaware.

Thats what the Star tried, Dallion frowned.

Did he? In all of recorded history, the Star has never tried to conquer the world, just convince others to do it for him.

The last one did. Arthurows was messed up in many ways, but he had realized his limitations and had set out to break them early on. That was why he planned to obtain skill gems of forgotten skills. If he had gotten the magic gem, he would have had it all; Dallion would have never gone to the Academy and the current crisis would never have occurred.



I just wanted to retrieve what is mine, Nil continued. Have been for years. The problem was that it was so Star-damned slow. The echo clenched his fist. If I were lucky, I'd get half a dozen scraps per year. Even during the artifact boom, I was only able to get a few dozen. You coming here, though he made a small circle in the air with his hand. I've gotten ten times more than the last few years combined. I'm talking about things that normally I wouldn't be allowed to set eyes on. Just by being at the Academy, so many opportunities appeared. Call it weakness, if you will, but I couldn't ignore that.

You made deals with people, Dallion muttered. The dwarf wasn't your friend he was a go-between.

He was an acquaintance. And yes, you made a lot of things possible. Nobles, ambitious mages, all of them were thrilled to take advantage of you, and I was thrilled to take advantage of them. It's how the world works. Only the very strong have the luxury of playing it straight, and often even they can't afford to. Just look at what's happening in Nerosol.

Did you cause that?

No. Nil shook his head. That mess was in its own making. If you'd believe it, I tried to stop it early on. I knew that Countess Priscord was ambitious. I warned Ch??? about it, but the guild master ignored me, as did Archduke Linatol. They were convinced that the countess could be crushed at any point, and they were right until someone else stepped in to make a deal with her.

Alien, Dallion thought. It remained unclear what he had gotten from it, but it was quite convenient that a member of the imperial family had died during the Stars attack. Furthermore, no one had been punished, or nearly no one. The lord mayor of Nerasol had taken the blame and was quickly replaced by Countess Priscord, who doubled her direct influence within days.

I didn't know what they planned, Nil said. In fact, you did most of the work on your own. I just took credit for it. Never pin all your hopes to one horse. I only had one rule: you weren't to be harmed.

That explained how Phoil had obtained the prison item, and why Nil was so insistent on Dallion remaining in the Learning Hall. It was no accident it had been used on him, nor was Nil's presence in the prison realm itself.

What went wrong? Dallion asked.

Strictly speaking, nothing went wrong. I already received everything I wanted. There are a few minor trinkets that still need to reach me, but they will in time, and even if they don't, it wouldn't be a monumental loss. The problem was you, dear boy.

Me?

Despite the assurances regarding your safety, they must have a way around it. The moment you were asked to make silver glass, I knew your life was at risk.

Is that why you insisted that it wasn't worth it?

I needed time to figure out what was going on. By then, sadly, our dealings had largely come to an end. With each side getting what it needed, there was no reason for communication to continue. In short, I was ignored. I had already told them how to get into the prison sphere, but that was no

guarantee. Make no mistake, if you hadn't broken out there was a three out of four chance that the boy would have killed you.

Dallion suspected as much.

Who did you make the deals with? he asked.

I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that. Moon vows were made. I cannot reveal any names or even make subtle hints.

By the sound of it, Adzorg had to have been quite desperate himself, given that he hadn't asked for the same assurances when Dallion's life was concerned. Dallion would have liked to think that the old mage had requested a Moon vow from the people involved. If that were the case, it must have been a very generic one. No doubt it had some exception that allowed people to kill him if Dallion threatened their life. After all, it was only after Phoel had killed Enroy that he had shifted his attention.

You really don't know what's going on?

No. Nil sighed. Even if I did, I wouldn't be able to tell you. And even if I had the chance, I'd probably not care. We all have our priorities and having the Academy burn a bit wouldn't cause too much harm in the grand scope of things.

And the empire?

Dear boy, the empire cannot fall. True, things seem tense right now, but it's not the first time. Back when the Fury alliance challenged the empire, many feared that it would mark the end of the world as we know it. You know quite well how that ended.

There was no denying that. However, it was thanks to the Academy's intervention that the furies had been defeated. Without mages, there would be no one to stop a threat from the sky, regardless of the disbalance of powers. All the awakened in the empire would be virtually powerless.

The timing of the chaos near the Learning Hall was chosen perfectly to coincide with the territory losses in Dreud province. If it fell and there was no mage support, the imperial capital would become vulnerable.

Teach me the spell, Dallion said.

After hearing Nil's part in everything, he knew precisely what the people behind this planned. It wasn't merely to disrupt the Learning Hall. That was the pretext to get the archmage involved. If he were to be killed in an open assault, that would shake the foundations of the Academy for months, maybe years. Nil had to know, but because of personal circumstances had chosen to go along with it. Despite himself, Dallion couldn't.

Chapter 725: Smile of the Puppet

Layers of the floor peeled off, constantly revealing new symbols. The spell Adzorg had created was rather ingenious in the way it worked. Rather than being a whole spell, it was semi-complete, merging with the symbols on the exit location. Once Dallion dispelled the top illusion, all he had to do was fill in the missing pieces in a calm and consistent fashion until a portal emerged.

The amount of skill involved was breathtaking. It was like looking at the inner-workings of a Rolex watch. Everything from the spell Dallion cast to the entrance symbols was arranged so elegantly,

not a thread out of place. Dallion knew that it would take him years, if not decades, to be able to replicate something of that nature, let alone create one himself. Compared to such sophistication, his own spells were little more than fingerpainting.

This will take me outside? he asked.

Yes, Nil said. Id advise jumping shield first. Escape portals dont move along a straight line.

I guess you didnt use them a lot. Dallion took the armadil shield off his back. In his current size, it was enough to cover half his torso. Ill still revert to normal when I go out, right?

*Most definitely, but other restrictions still apply.*

Restrictions always apply, Dallion said beneath his breath.

Splitting into instances, he jumped into the portal. Gravity suddenly shifted as he was spat out from the side of the buildings wall, a considerable distance from the main entrance. Most of his instances rolled over, then jumped to their feet. Only two remained upright, though in the end it didnt particularly matter. Being away from anything significant, the spot he had emerged from could be described as fairly safe, although that was highly relative.

The sky was green with shardflies. Torrents of them were roaming the clusters of buildings like tornado cones, slicing everything in their path. Mages were flying in all directions, casting spells like wild. Each purple blast would send thousands of insects to falling to the ground, yet that would do nothing to diminish the overall mass. Magic domes were everywhere. No longer keeping the creatures inside, their goal was keeping them out.

As Dallion was staring at the chaos above, a series of magic projectiles pierced through a flying mages shield barrier, then enveloped him in a ball of flames.

What the heck? Dallion thought, instinctively bursting into instances.

You didnt expect that the people orchestrating this would just rely on a swarm of shardflies, did you? Nil asked.

But I thought mages never fought mages. Not openly, at least.

If they werent being subtle anymore, it meant that they would go directly for the archmage. As much as Nil would disapprove of the idea, Dallion would have to reach him first.

Strapping the shield to his armnot that he had returned to his normal sizeDallion rushed away from the building.

Do you even know where youre going? Nil asked.

Dallion didnt reply. He didnt have to know, not yet. For now, the most important thing was to get out of the gander zone and the Learning hall group of buildings. After that, he could worry about directions. Knowing the way mages through, the archmages home would probably be something large and majestic made to be seen and identified from anywhere within the Academy.

Barely had Dallion passed a hundred feet, when a stone statue covered with purple symbols emerged. That was a magic construct. Similar to metalins in the realms, they were massive golem-like creatures whose purpose was to guard certain areas. Dallion vaguely remembered Cheska boasting that shed been admitted to a class that dealt with their creation, despite it being usually reserved for apprentices. All that he knew was that the creatures were nearly fast, massive, nearly indestructible, and potentially capable of casting pre-set spells.

The statues massive hand flew at Dallion, crushing one of his instances. Thankfully, Dallion had managed to roll safely away in the rest of them. Knowing the difference in strength, Dallion punched in the direction of the construct, letting out a point attack.

A cone of force punctured the air, landing on the statues chest. It was enough to push the construct fifty feet back, but not topple it, let alone cause any damage. A fine glow emerged, covering its entire body like a layer of armor.

Just great, Dallion whispered.

If things would have been different, he would have almost enjoyed trying out everything he had learned on the thing. With a sky full of killer shardflies and rogue mages, he couldnt take neither the time, nor the chance. The only solution was fleeing past it.

Combining his acrobatic and athletic skills, Dallion split into instances, then dashed towards the statue, aiming to jump over it. The attempt ended in complete failure.

The construct reacted to each of his instances, slamming him mercilessly each time. Its speed was the equivalent to Dallions own, and its reaction was even faster.

Did you make that too? Dallion asked, retreating with his remaining instances.

That would be quite the achievement, Nil said. This is one of the first emperors constructs, created back when the Academy was established. You might say thats one of the reasons there were so few mage rebellions. They kept everyone loyal in the early days. Since then, theyve acted as another layer of defense.

Why is it after me?!

*No idea, especially since this one isnt from here. All of them were moved out of the Learning Hall ages ago. The ones we have are local constructs.*

Several thoughts went through Dallions mind at once. The most urgent was how to escape the situation. While splitting was giving him a slight advantage, the construct was keeping him pinned down. Eventually, hed lose the stamina to keep up if the emerald shardflies didnt ribbon him by them.

Drawing his harpsisword, Dallion did a vertical line attack. A line emerged on the ground, causing it to split all the way to the construct itself. Just as before, that wasnt enough to cause a scratch on the statue. However, it was enough to let Dallion leap into the air and do three more line attacks. If his reasoning was correct, there was supposed to be a shardfly nest underneath; cutting the top layer of soil and rock would likely be enough to cause the patch beneath the constructs feet to collapse, taking it with him. Sadly, no such thing happened.

The statue leaped upreaching for Dallions right arm.

Lux, boost! Dallion ordered.

Blue flames surrounded the dartblade, pushing Dallion painfully to the side just quick enough to avoid the statues grasp.

Still in the air, Dallions immediate thought was how to protect himself from the swarm of shardflies, when he suddenly noticed: none of them had moved to his vicinity. As tempting as it was to think that it was all thanks to his empathy trait, Dallion strongly doubted it.

As both landed on the ground, the statue charged directly at Dallion. The construct simply knew no rest.

Ruby, fly up! Dallion said, splitting into instances. As high as possible.

The shardfly obeyed without question, darting upwards.

The construct was less than ten feet away. Yet, instead of continuing towards Dallion, it leapt up over him. Taking the opportunity, Dallion did a quick point attack, throwing the statue off course and safely away from the shardfly.

Go till you reach the swarm! Dallion shouted.

The moment Ruby did, the statue froze in place. The purple glow and magic symbols on it disappeared, changing the engine of destruction to a completely harmless decoration.

It was the shardflies, Dallion thought, still maintaining half a dozen instances just in case.

Well done. Clapping filled the air, coming as if from everywhere. It was just a single clap, yet seemed to surround Dallion. Moments later the source appeared the fury who had instructed Dallion in his first steps of magic.

Palag. Dallion fastened his grip round the harpsisword.

Unfortunately, my dear assistant isnt available at the moment, the fury said, flowing gently towards Dallion, two feet from the ground. Not that I doubt his loyalty. Its just that he hasnt reached the level at which to defeat you.

Youre the mage whos controlling him. The one whos been controlling everyone.

Im flattered, mister Darude. However, Im just a large part in a larger plot. I did have echoes in all the children, though I wasnt the only one. You didnt have to be so rough when fighting Phoil. It would have been much better for all of us if you had just remained in the prison item. Everything would have been over and youd have all the deniability in the world.

Thats not what the noble said. Dallion tapped the tip of his harpsisword in his boot, causing the weapon to vibrate. The real noble I was fighting.

Ah, some people tend to get a bit overenthusiastic. Killing you was meant as a final resort. After all, the former archmage still commands a bit of respect, even with the recent administrative changes. We would have let you live.

If this were Palag talking, Dallion felt confident he could tell whether the fury was lying or not. Now, though, he could only guess.

So, all this was just to what? Kill the archmage? Destroy the Academy?

Adzorg was right. You're still too naive. The best plans have more than one goal. We've already accomplished several of our goals, and there's still time to accomplish the last.

The fury cast a spell faster than the eye could see. A flash of lightning shot next to Dallion's head, deliberately missing him by half an inch. The speed was such that only after the spell had concluded did Dallion's instincts move in an attempt to evade it. If it came to a direct confrontation, there would be no competition.

Before that, there's something I'd like from you. Palag rubbed his hands. Rather, a few things.

Why not just take them?

Because they're in a place, I can't reach. The fury narrowed his eyes. I suppose I can get the obvious: the Vermillion ring, your crackling dagger, the kaleidervisto, that magnificent artifact that you managed to clear. Vortex finders will be quite useful in what's to come. I could even take that magnificent weapon of yours. By the way you're using it, you have no idea how valuable it truly is.

Dallion took a step back. The thought of losing everything filled him with a sense of vulnerability that he hadn't felt in a long time. Worst of all, there wasn't anything he could do about it.

I'll offer you a way out, Palag continued. I want the Moonstone you're keeping in your realm, as well as the silver glass sword you made. Return that and the Vermillion rings and I'll let you keep the rest.

What's to say that you won't kill me the moment I give them and just take everything else?

What's to say I won't kill you if you refuse?

Any other day Dallion would count on the Moons protecting him. If he were a standard mage, they probably would, but through a series of events, he was both beyond their protection, as well as cursed.

What about the shardflies? Dallion asked, playing for time. There was one card he could play.

What about them?

Did I make them appear? Focusing, Dallion concentrated on the fury, trying to drill into his head with a glance. The approach was almost childish, but as he'd come to know, in this world, even childish things worked.

Of course you did, back when you helped capture the reality chameleon. You don't think that was an accident, do you? Palag laughed. I'd been luring to our reality for years. Spells alone weren't enough to capture it. The moment the creature sensed a high magic presence, it hit back into its reality. A notice hunter and a weak fury apprentice, on the other hand, were just enough to find it without scaring it off. You helped catch it, and after some convincing, I made it slowly change the reality beneath the Learning Halls foundations, bit by bit.

Sweat covered Dallion's forehead. He could feel pushing through into the fury's mind, but still wasn't fully there.

Felygn, I know I'm cursed, but I really could use your help on this! He thought.

A split second later, reality changed.

Chapter 726: Palag's Story

## MEMORY FRAGMENT

### Tamin Empires eastern borders, 16 years ago

The sound of galloping horses and creaky wooden wheels almost blotted out the crying that filled the wagon. There were three dozen children in total, gathered in far less space than could hold them. The younger were sitting in the laps of the older. Even then, there was barely enough space to move around. Yet even these conditions were far better than what most of them had experienced.

Smoke in the distance. One of the riders by the wagon pointed.

Even from this distance, Palag could sense the smell of ash in the air, thick, sticky, choking him. Even after being subjected to it for months, he couldn't get accustomed to it.

Leave it, the driver yelled back. We're packed. Tell the Order to send someone else to check it out later.

To check it out later, Palag thought. In his current state, he couldn't tell whether that was a good or a bad thing. Ever since the end of the war, he had been moved from place to place by various groups. Some had tried to protect him, capture him, sell him, rescue him, or just leave him to die. Now he was being rescued again, but those who claimed they served the Seven Moons. There was a time when that would have been reassuring. Now, Palag felt too numb to believe or care. He just prepared for the worst, biding his time for the right time to escape.

The main issue was that, unlike most of the other children, he was a fury. A few years ago, his parents had told him that he'd witness a great and glorious new age in which the skies and the earth itself would belong to the furies. The great king had amassed an infinite army, uniting all the fractured cloud forts, leading them to the path of victory. It was inevitable that he succeeded. And then the clouds fell. The memory still haunted Palag; destruction he couldn't possibly imagine, turning the clouds red with blood.

You okay back there? the person next to the rider asked. She appeared to be a kind woman wearing the symbol of the Order of the Seven Moons. Sadly, of all the people that initially appeared kind, few were. You better get some sleep, she continued. There's close to an hour to the monastery.

Several children looked away. They had seen as many horrors as Palag to trust her.

Don't say a word, the fury told himself. Just pretend you don't exist.

The younger child sitting in him had passed out from exhaustion, granting Palag a bit of quiet.

We should hurry, initiate. Another of the riders approached the wagon. There are marauders in the area, possibly worse.

The wagon will fall apart if we go faster! the driver grumbled.

Cant you handle them? The woman turned to the rider.

If theyre just marauders, probably. If its something else, no. Theres too few of us, and the cargos rather valuable.

That was something else Palag had heard a lot. War orphans had become another word for free labor. When it came to furies, it was even worse than that. A fury, even a young one, could be sold for a purse of coins. Some even bought furies only to resell them, though more often theyd just take them by force without giving a thing in exchange.

If we dont speed up, theres no guarantee youll make it to the monastery, the rider continued. You hired me for my skills, so listen to what you paid for.

The woman sighed, then placed her hand on the wooden seat of the wagon. The blink of the eye later, the creaking stopped. The wagon suddenly seemed a lot cleaner and sturdier.

Is this enough to get us faster to the monastery? the woman asked the driver.

The horse will be exhausted, the man said. But its possible, initiate.

Then do it. And if something else attacks us, Ill deal with it myself.

The conversation ended there. The driver yelled to the horses, forcing them to go faster, while the rider moved away from the wagon. Palag couldnt tell why, but it was clear that everyone was scared of the woman for some reason. Not once had she raised her voice, and yet people were respectful, almost apologetic, when talking to her.

Where are you taking us? one of the older children dared to ask.

The woman looked straight at him with the warmest smile a human was capable of.

To a monastery of the Order, she replied. There youll get food, clothes, water, and a place to rest until you get better.

The answer seemed to calm many.

What about our parents? the boy pressed on.

If they are alive, the Order will find them and bring them to take you home. If they arent, well see where we could find another home for you. Theres no need to be afraid. I know youve been through a lot, but youre safe now. The Order will not let anything happen to you. The Moons wont allow it.

If the Moons wouldnt allow anything bad to happen to us, how did we end up here? Palag thought, though he was smart enough not to voice his concerns. He had witnessed what happened to people who caused trouble.

The trip took them close to half an hour. By the time they arrived at a crudely built wooden hamlet, the horses were entirely spent. Large logs formed a wall surrounding a series of three-story buildings. It was far worse than Palags home in the clouds, but a lot better than he had seen in the last few years. The gates opened, letting the wagon enter an inner courtyard. There already were two other wagons there, all of them empty. A line of children had formed, making their way to one of the larger buildings.



You can get off now, the woman said. Her tone was polite, but there was no mistake that the request was in effect an order.

Without wasting time, the children got off, the older helping the younger. Once all of them were out, they were separated into groups by age. Palag expected them to be further divided based on whether they were human or not, but to his surprise, that didnt happen.

A boy, no more than five years older than Palag, passed by carrying a basket of bread. Hed stop at each child in the line and hand them a small loaf. It was no larger than a childs fist, but for many, it was nothing short of a feast.

Another of the neighboring villages was attacked. Palag heard the woman from the carriage say to another member of the Order. If we dont put an end to it, someone might get ideas and try to attack us.

Ill inform the bishop, the other replied.

What about the village?

Thats the archdukes purview. Besides, Star-spawn are roaming the area. Corpses must have caught their attention. A hunter will be needed to deal with the problem.

Hunters. The womans mouth twisted upon speaking the word. Those vultures wouldnt lift a finger for something so small.

Before Palag could hear more of the conversation, his group was urged towards one of the nearby buildings. One by one they were made to enter, remaining a few minutes, then coming out again. Initially, Dallon was next to last.

Come along, an old man with the symbol of the order on his tunic said.

After some hesitation, Palag obeyed.

The room was rather small and bare. A rack of folded clothes was placed in one corner, near several baskets of bread.

Another fury, a man approached Palag, while two more sat behind a desk. A few moments later, a woman appeared from a side room, closing the door behind her. How did you manage to survive on the border undiscovered till now?

We were moved from place to place.

One of those. The larger man behind the desk sighed. Do you still have your powers?

Palag was about to answer, when the person near him put his hand on the furys neck. The sensation was strange, as if insects crawled out of the mans hand, burying themselves beneath Palags skin. When he removed his hand, moments later, the sensation was gone.

Yes, the fury replied.

I thought the border skirmishes would be over by now, the woman said as she approached. Remove your shirt, she told Palag.

Slowly, he did so.

A few bruises, no serious scars, she said, inspecting him closely. Nothing alarming.

Hell still have to be purified.

Do you trust in the Moons? The woman looked Palag in the eyes. When he didnt answer at once, she stepped away. He doesnt seem to be a favored, she told the people at the desk. Ill still check, though.

Have you lived on a cloud? the large man at the desk leaned forward.

Palag nodded.

Have you fought since you came to earth?

That was a tricky question to answer. Palag wanted to say he didnt start anything, but that would be a lie. There were many times when he had stolen food and fought to protect it. Sometimes he had taken food from people weaker than himself: wounded, old people, other children

Yes, he said at last.

Have you killed anyone?

The fury shook his head.

Good. That makes things easier.

The man next to him went to the rack of clothes, took some, then shoved them into Palags hands. They didnt feel particularly comfortable, but were a lot better than the fury was used to; and at least they were clean.

Youll be under our care, the large man continued. While here, there are certain rules that wed like you to follow. No stealing, no fighting, and always remain within the monastery. Itll take you a few days to get accustomed to civilized life. Can you read?

Palag shook his head. He had learned the language the hard way. Even with his ability to hear the faintest nuances, it had taken him over a year. Hed not once had access to scrolls or books, though, and in all honesty, he didnt want to.

No matter. Someone will teach you how to pray to the Moons. We are all their creations and they deserve our thanks. Food will be brought to your room today, but from tomorrow, youre expected to eat with the other boys here.

Okay

How old are you?

Nine, Palag lied. In truth, he was seven, but he had found that claiming to be older gave him certain advantages. Merchants valued older children more, and younger children relied on them.

A bit small for a nine-year-old. The other man at the desk arched a brow.

Since youre old enough, youll help out with small tasks while youre here. Nothing much. Youll carry things from place to place, help wash clothes, small things he waved his head. Is everything clear?

Palag felt too numb to say no. The truth was that he didn't particularly care. The way he saw things, he'd only remain at the monastery for a few days. After that, either he'd be moved somewhere else, or he'd escape himself. Preferably, he was going to escape. Despite the number of people, the people of the Order were rather lax. There hadn't been any guard patrols or even warriors. The riders who'd found Palag and his group were hired mercenaries, who weren't allowed to set foot within the walls.

Boy? the man repeated. Is everything clear?

Yes. The boy nodded.

Alright. One last thing before you go. What's your name?

For the first time in months, Palag felt uncertain what to do. No one had asked his name, not even the children he had grouped up with in the wilderness. On the other hand, he hadn't asked for anyone's name, either. Doing so was better; it kept him from getting attached to anyone he'd later lose. If he was only going to remain for a few days here, why was the man asking his name?

Palag, he said faintly.

Palag. The man repeated, rubbing his chin. Well, Palag, let me welcome you to the one hundred and twenty-first monastery of the Order of the Seven Moons. May the seven be with you.

Chapter 727: Palag's Story - Veneration

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Order of the Seven Stars 121st Monastery, 16 years ago**

Months of vigilance and suspicion proved to be no match for a warm bed. Despite Palag's attempts, he was asleep moments after touching the sheets. When he woke up, it was already dawn. There was a tray of food placed on a stool nearby.

It had been so long that Palag had slept in a single room that he couldn't distinguish it from a dream. The thought filled him with dread that he'd suddenly wake up in the middle of a pile of mud in the wilderness. For over a minute, the boy remained there, staring at the wooden tray, waiting for him to wake up. A loud rumble in his stomach broke the silence, showing him that everything was quite real.

Not waiting for further proof, he rushed to the tray, wolfing down what food there was. The Order had only given him a small bowl of thin soup and a bit of bread, though far more than he was used to. It wasn't cold, nor did it have the taste of rot and dirt that usually accompanied what scraps he'd find in the wilderness.

The door to the room opened.

Are you done? The older boy from yesterday asked.

Palag looked at the tray. There was only a bit of bread left. Showing it in his mouth, he nodded.

Leave that and come with me, the other said. He was in his mid-teens, which made him practically grown from Palag's point of view. Even so, he seemed rather soft. There were no scars or scratches on his hands and face. The boy probably had never seen what war and misery were like, spending all his time in the comfort of the monastery. In the grand scope of things, Palag had no right to hate or envy him for it, but he did very much.

The two made their way to the other side of the complex, to a small pond. A small group of people stood there, washing clothes with water from a nearby well. The water wasn't as filthy as what Palag has seen, though it was by no means clear.

Take off your clothes, then wash up, the older boy said.

Why? Palag took a step back. He had just put on the clothes last night. They were brand new and quite clean, as far as he was concerned.

Because we don't need to get the monastery full of nasty critters. You didn't think we gave you your own room just like that?

That's not my room?

That's a visitor's room. All new arrivals get them. After you're done, it gets cleaned and ready for the next to join.

But an entire room?

There are several buildings full of rooms that are for visitors, the teen laughed. It's rare that furies use them. Most of your kind that come here were crazy clean.

Palag looked away. Even now, months after being forced to live on the ground, he was disgusted by dirt. Without it, though, he was a lot more noticeable. The grime on his body had been a shield, one that he felt reluctant to remove.

We don't have all day. The older boy crossed his arms.

Unable to see a way out, the fury complied. Using his air magic for the first time in weeks, he removed his clothes, then went on to strip all the dirt off his skin. Not a single drop of water was used there was no reason for it. Half way through, Palag glanced about, fearful of the creation he might get. None of the people nearby bothered to look preoccupied with their own chores.

Done? the teen asked.

Palag nodded.

Get some clothes from there. The other pointed at a nearby washing line. You can try them, right?

The fury nodded again. A fresh set of clothes was taken from the line, gracefully sliding onto him. Using air currents, Palag held the trousers still, while lifting himself in the air, then floating into them. The last time he remembered getting dressed like this was back in his cloud home, before the war. The memory brought a faint smile, one that he quickly wiped off.

What are we doing now? he asked. The men from the previous day had mentioned something about helping out and doing chores.

Now, we take you to your permanent room.

As it turned out soon enough, the room was shared with twenty others, all boys roughly of the same age. There were a handful of furies present, but they were treated no differently than the humans.

Such a waste of space, Palag thought.

They could have hung a few hammocks from the ceiling and have the furies sleep there. That would have allowed for twice as many people. On the other hand, having a bit of extra space was nice.

Which is mine? Palag asked more eagerly than he would have liked.

The older boy pointed at an empty bed in the far end. Today you have just one task, he said. Get accustomed to your room and get to know your roommates.

The task sounded as strange as it was unappealing. Palag had no intention of sharing any information about himself, nor did he want to learn anything about anyone else. The moment the teen left, he sat on his bed, demonstratively, almost as if daring anyone to approach him. No one did. Instead, they continued doing what they were doing, as if he wasnt there. They werent rube about it. They didnt ignore him, and another fury even brought his food when everyone except Palag came back from having lunch. No one would start a conversation with him, though, making it clear that it was upon him to take the first step. After a few more hours, he did.

After all that time, he decided to ask someones name. He did so in the hopes that the others would refuse to share it, thus putting an end to Palags attempts at socializing. At least then hed be able to tell the teen, or anyone else from the Order, that hed tried his best. To his surprise, he received an answer. To his further surprise, Palag responded by sharing his own name. At that moment, it was as if a dam had broken. All the conversations bottled up within him for the last two years rushed to get out.

Palag would spend hours talking about what hed been through, not only during the war, but before that. Often, he wouldnt even wait to be asked a question, jumping from tangent to tangent. Only by evening did he stop, joining the rest of the dining halla large building in the heart of the monastery. Eating was done in silence, according to the Orders rules. Afterwards, the conversations continued. For the first time in a very long time, Palag felt as if he were home. Still, in a corner of his mind, a small voice remained, warning him that something wasnt right. He had gotten accustomed to things far too quickly. However, when provided with warmth and comfort he had lacked for years, he brushed those concerns aside.

Life in the monastery was as simple as could be expected. Palag, along with the other boys his age, was responsible for minor menial tasks. None of them were particularly difficult or exhausting, just cumbersome.

After a few days, Palag had grown accustomed to everything to such a degree that hed thought hed been there for years. The tasks were clear, the food abundant, he had come to know most of the people within the monastery. Hed even been able to learn reading and writing at a remarkably fast ratefar faster than he thought himself capable of. It seemed like bliss, far better than anything hed experienced even when in the clouds. And yet, even in this ideal environment, there were questions that kept bothering him. One day, Palag finally built up the courage to ask them.

Why arent we allowed to go outside? He approached one of the clerics.

The man smiled. He was a lot older than anyone else and tended to have a far more relaxed attitude. The fury hadnt seen him get upset once, even where there was a reason for him to be.

Who says youre not allowed? The old man smiled.

Palag opened his mouth to answer, but found that he couldnt. He knew that he shouldnt go outside the monastery, but couldnt remember anyone actually telling him.

You can leave anytime you want to, the cleric continued. The question is, do you really want to?

That was a good point. There was no reason to go outside. There was only pain, danger, and death in the wilderness. In the monastery, on the other hand, he was always fed, clothed, he had a purpose and a place to sleep he had friends.

I can take you out, if you want. Or you can ask anyone else. The only reason that they haven't let you is because they didn't know you wanted to.

But why are the gates closed and guarded?

They're closed to keep people from coming in, not you going out.

Does that mean you can leave if you want to?

The man let out a quiet laugh.

You're not going easy on me, are you? Yes, I suppose I can, but only as long as the Moons will. The man looked up. There were four Moons in the sky, barely visible in the noon sky. Some are called to stay, others are called to leave. Some, like you, are yet to be called to do anything. If it happens, you'll know.

Is that why people leave every day?

That was another strange thing that Palag had discovered. Strictly speaking, he had never seen anyone from his room leave. Every morning there'd be a few empty beds that were filled up by children freshly brought to the monastery. He'd even discussed it with a few of the others, but they were as clueless as he was.

The Moons know best. The cleric nodded. That's why they take good care of us. Tell me, have you seen anyone planting food in the monastery?

No

Then where does it come from? There are a lot of people and they eat three times per day, and yet the food never ends.

The Moons bring it?

No. The man laughed so loudly that Palag thought he'd cause a scene. And yet, no one in the vicinity seemed to care. No, it's not the Moons. People bring the food, people following the Moons will. That's the great difference between those who serve the Moons and everyone else. The people outside follow their own paths. The Order follows the path of the Moons, ensuring that everyone in the world is taken care of. Or, at least, as many as possible.

That explained why they had gone out of their way to find Palag and children like him, taking them to safety.

Can I follow the Moons? the boy asked.

The cleric didn't answer. Patting Palag on the head, he slowly walked away. From that day on, the question grew. Soon Palag found that he no longer found joy in the simple way of life he'd been leading. He was no longer content doing small tasks. He wanted to do more to help the world and everyone in it.

Several times he'd ask a member of the Order how he could become closer to the Moons. Each time, they'd tell him not to worry about such things and continue with his chores. Then a week later the unexpected happened. When the fury approached a cleric with his usual question, he wasn't turned away. Instead, the woman took him by the hand and went straight to the stone building in the middle of the monastery.

Palag didn't know anything about that building other than he wasn't allowed inside. Now he was going to find out.

Chapter 728: Palag's Story - Validation

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Order of the Seven Stars 121st Monastery, 16 years ago**

The inside of the stone building was a lot different from the rest of the monastery's architecture. Palag had the distinct impression that he'd seen it somewhere before, possibly when he'd been very young. However, there was nothing made out of stone on the cloud he'd grown up on. The fury tribe he'd been part of prided itself for remaining true to their ways. As far as he was aware they hadn't even approached the side of a mountain.

Where are we going? he asked.

To the awakening altar, the woman said in a calm voice. Same as we do every day.

Every day? That didn't sound right. Palag had never set foot here. He distinctly remembered thinking about it. On a few occasions he and a few of his roommates had wondered what was inside.

Don't worry about it. The Moons only show us the path that is available to us.

The standard vague response. Up till now it had always been enough to put his mind at ease. Now, though, it seemed to have the opposite effect. Instead of subduing his questions, it only made more of them pop up in his mind.

I'm not an awakened, the fury said. Why am I going to an altar?

The woman glanced at him, a thin smile appearing on her face.

Because that's the will of the Moons. If all goes well, you'll have no more questions when it's over.

There were no doors within the building, just a series of corridors and interconnected chambers. As they walked, Palag saw that there were others already there. All of them were clerics and curates. In fact, other than him there wasn't a single monk or acolyte. It was as if the monastery held two worlds: one outside of the stone building and one within.

A single corridor led to the innermost chamber, where an awakened altar awaited them. One look was enough to remind Palag that he had seen it several times before. The woman was right; this wasn't his first time here. He'd been coming every day since arriving, even before moving to the shared room. One other thing, he hadn't been at the monastery a week, but rather several months.

Remember what to do? the woman asked, stopping a few steps from the altar.

I place my hand on the central part, Palag said. Then I step inside. Images were swarming his mind.

Yes, that's good. Now, do it.

Will I see a Moon this time?

The question surprised both of them. Palag had no idea why he had asked it. At the same time, the woman had no idea what to answer. Her confusion was plastered all over her face, as if shed witnessed something that wasnt supposed to exist.

Only they would know. A forced smile emerged. Go ahead. She gestured to the altar.

Taking the final few steps, Palag placed his hand on the altar and closed his eyes. Doing so wasnt necessary, but he had found it helped him. Now all he had to do was concentrate and

## **SHRINE AWAKENING**

The furys surroundings disappeared, replaced by a courtyard paved with blue marble. A dozen columns rose up at its borders, going up tens of feet almost to the very sky. Fields of blue flowers continued to the horizon, all beneath the light of a massive Blue Moon.

Hello? Palag looked around.

The last few times nothing had happened. Of course, that hadnt stopped Palag from trying. All that he knew was that he could remain in the realm of the shrine for as long as he desired and not a moment would pass in the real world.

Hello! he said more forcefully.

Back again, a male voice said next to him.

Looking in that direction, Palag saw a man dressed in a simple blue outfit. He didnt appear particularly old, though wasnt young either. Thinking about it, the man didnt appear much of anything. He wasnt particularly tall or particularly short, neither fat, nor slim. His features were so average that it could be said they were nondescript. The only thing of interest were the clothes he was wearing; deep blue in color, they were unmistakably of fury design.

No, this isnt cloud fabric, the man said, as if reading Palags mind. Its more than that.

What?

Youre not here to ask about the clothes. They shifted in the standard trousers and tunic the monks of the Order wore. So, ask your question.

Which one?

The one you really wanted to ask.

Are you a Moon? Palag wondered.

Thats not the question, the man said in a stern voice. But yes. Im Astreza, the Moon of Awakening.

The fury had no idea what that meant, but it sounded impressive. The mere fact that a Moon had appeared was enough to make him feel as if lightning static was running through his body. There were seven entities that watched over the entire world and one of them was now here, talking to him. It was almost too good to be true.

I want to follow you, Palag said quickly, afraid he might lose his chance. What do I do?



Hmm. The Moon walked by him.

Last time you were here, you asked if you could follow me. It seems you've already found the answer to that question.

We've spoken before?

You asked, I didn't answer. You weren't ready then.

But I am now?

No. The Moon shook his head. But you have the potential to be. Why do you want to follow me?

Because the monks and clerics said

No. The Moon cut him short. Why do you want to follow me?

Spoken out loud, the question was less obvious than Palag originally thought. He could have easily just said yes to gain access to the awakened powers. It was no secret that awakened lived completely different lives than anyone else. This was double for furies. Among the race, so few were granted with the gift that they were considered nobility. Yet, was that the right thing to do? Palag wasn't in the clouds anymore; he was on the ground, in a small wooden monastery in the wilderness.

Will it keep me safe? he asked.

Is that what you want? The Moon mused. Safety? Comfort? You already have that here. The clerics of the order placed a limiting echo in your realm, designed specifically to keep you happy. You'll always be content and overjoyed with what you're doing. All your fears and concerns will be forgotten.

But will I be safe?

Will you be safe if you become an awakened? Even we cannot freely meddle in this world. Maybe you live a long and joyful life full of luxury. Maybe you won't last another month. All you can do is make a choice and hope for the best.

Make a choice and hope for the best. Many would have found that terrifying, but Palag was glad. During the last few years, he hadn't been given the opportunity to choose anything. He didn't choose for his race to attack the empire, he didn't choose to end up alone on the ground, nor did he choose to spend years hiding in constant fear, eating anything he could find.

I want to become an awakened! he said with determination.

In that case, welcome to your realm, awakened.

Reality shifted again. Palag was in a large white room made of clouds. There were no doors, windows or any other openings, nothing but floor, walls, and ceiling.

## **YOU ARE LEVEL 1**

A glowing blue rectangle glowed above his head. On it, the words body, mind, reaction, and perception were written along with the number three beside each. The interesting thing was that the text was written in Palag's own language.

**You are in a small cloud room.**

**Smash the window to choose your destiny.**

Uncertain what to do, the fury circled the rectangle to check what was written on the other side. Anticlimactically, the text was identical.

Do you mean I must break this? the fury asked.

No one responded. If the Moon was still paying attention, he was doing so from a distance.

Palag waited for a few minutes, then created an air current, grabbing hold of it like a whip, and shattered the blue rectangle.

Fragments burst throughout the room, then abruptly flew back to one another, reassembling the object. However, this time, the rectangle had turned purple. One more word had appeared the word magic.

A doorway formed in the cloud wall across Palag. It was quite obvious what was expected of him. Even so, he hesitated for over a minute before continuing on.

Beams of sunlight shone through holes in the ceiling. Despite them, there didnt seem to be any other doors or openings, just a passage forward. After a hundred steps, the corridor split into three.

**You are at a crossroads.**

**Choose the item that will serve you best.**

A purple rectangle emerged.

The forward branch of the corridor continued for another ten steps, ending with a wall. On it was what could only be described as a mages staff. That seemed like a good choice. The left corridor held a short sword, while on the end of the right a buckler hung from the wall.

Three items, one choice.

Spellcraft, Palag read. Attack. Guard. Can I choose all three?

It would have been nice for that to be an option. With these three skills, hed be able to make sure no one hurt him ever again. What was more, hed be able to protect others. Sadly, it was unlikely the Moons would allow him to receive everything he wanted. Not at once, at least.

Instinct urged him to go for the sword. In this cruel world, the only way to remain alive was to eliminate any threat. Was that the best choice, though? The buckler was even less useful. What good was it to defend others if he couldnt protect himself? As for the staff, that remained the big unknown. Logic suggested it would allow him to cast spells, but what exactly did that mean? All furies already had wind magic. Gaining more wasnt necessarily a good thing. Though, on the other hand, it could turn out to be a huge advantage.

The sword is only good for attack, Palag thought. The shieldonly for defense. Maybe the staff is somewhere in-between?

Not made exclusively for attack or defense, but combining both That would explain why it was placed between them.

The more Palag thought, the more he considered that to be the correct choice. So, in the end, he stepped forward and took the staff from the wall.

### **SPELLCRAFT skills obtained**

#### **You have broken through your first barrier.**

When Palag next blinked, he was back in the real world, his hand on the awakening altar. As much as the room was the same, it was also different. Purple lines were visible everywhere, glowing beneath the walls and floor. One of the seven hexagonal prisms that composed the altar had also changed color, turning bright purple.

Theres no need to hurry, the woman said as she slowly approached. Take a while to rest.

What happened? the fury asked.

Nothing for you to worry about. She grabbed him by the hand. Its all just a bad dream. Everything will be a lot clearer in a bit.

Why is everything purple?

The woman froze still. This wasnt a question he was supposed to ask. All the past times, Palag had ended up dazed and confused. Normally, he'd lose all memory of his visit in a matter of minutes, only to go through it all again in a few days. This time, that hadn't been the case.

You're awakened, the woman whispered in reverence.

Yes. The Moon said I could. Palag allowed himself a smile. But he didn't tell me what to do now that I'm awakened. Do you know? he looked at her for advice.

For the first time since he'd been here, a member of the Order didn't have an answer.

Chapter 729: Palag's Story - Visit

### **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

#### **Order of the Seven Stars 121st Monastery, 16 years ago**

There was no doubt that something major was going on. Palag had instantly been taken to the bishop's building, where he'd been made to wait outside the chambers, all the time under the escort of two clerics. None of them said a word, and seeing their stern expressions, the fury decided to do the same. However, thanks to his natural skills, he was able to hear part of the conversation taking place in the neighboring room.

You're sure he's not faking it? the bishop asked.

I checked twice, a woman replied. It was the same that had taken Palag into the monastery to begin with, although he still couldn't remember her name. There's no mistaking it. He's awakened alright, and with magic.

Awakening that late is he an otherworlder?

No, the woman said with absolute certainty. He's not. Just fortunate.

That could be argued. A fury war orphan that awakened in a monastery of the Order. All the great powers will get involved in this one.

There was a moment of silence. Palag resisted the urge to move forward. He couldn't understand why they were keeping him so close to the discussion. No doubt they knew what furies were capable of; he wasn't the only one here, after all. Did they want him to hear? Or maybe they just didn't care?

We can keep him hidden, the initiate said.

Too late for that, the bishop sighed. The archbishop already knows. That means that by now, so does everyone else in the grand citadel. I wouldn't be surprised if the Academy is planning to pay us a visit. They always sniff out their own.

We can deny it, or move him to another

The Moon has made a choice. We can't go against that.

You can't be certain.

There were several more moments of silence.

We've known each other for a long time, but don't be overconfident in your abilities. The Moons wouldn't have granted him the gift unless they had plans. Potentially, he could become a major player. You and I are destined to remain pawns.

Very well, the woman said reluctantly. Then how do we proceed?

I'll have a talk with him, then see where the dice fall.

The door to the bishop's chambers opened. Instantly, the clerics stood to attention.

Palag, come here, the woman said, her usual warm smile shining on her face. We need to have a word with you.

The boy had barely made a step forward when the woman darted a warning glance at each of the clerics near him.

Alone. Her intonation changed slightly, making it clear that it wasn't a request.

Uncertain of what was expecting him, the boy slowly made his way into the neighboring room. Once he stepped in, the door closed behind him. The suddenness sent a shiver throughout his body.

It's alright, the woman said, placing her hand on Palag's head. You're safe here.

Palag wanted to nod, but he found he couldn't. Too many conflicting emotions were stirring within him. Ever since joining the monastery, Palag had been told verbally and non-verbally that the bishop was the one closest to the Moons. Being in his presence felt him with a sensation of awe-filled wonder. The conversation he'd heard, though, made him feel afraid both eager to see what lied beyond the monastery and scared that he'd be taken away from it. If this was what it was like being awakened, he was no longer certain he'd made the right choice.

Palag, the bishop said to him. His voice was calm, soft and pleasant even if he wasn't smiling. I heard you've awakened.

The boy nodded.

Thats good. The man went behind the large ornate desk and sat down. Similar to the rest of the room, it was grand and richly decorated, very much in contrast to the rest of the monastery. It was said that the bishop himself had crafted his chamber and everything in it an impressive feat even for an awakened. You also say that you spoke to a Moon when you did? he went on.

Y-yes.

Thats rather rare. Thousands have awakened, yet only a hand few mention catching a glimpse of a Moon while that happened.

I spoke to him, Palag insisted. He said he was the Moon of Awakening.

The Blue Moon? Are you sure?

Yes.

Maybe it was light blue, the woman suggested. Cyan, perhaps.

No, it was deep blue.

The adults looked at one another. Having the Moon of Awakening appear was, in itself, rare. For that to happen to a fury was inexplicable. The Orange Moon was the Moon of furies. By all logic, she should have appeared. That was what the knowledge in the Orders scrolls stated. Each Moon was linked to one race and one trait. In the dawn of time, back when the world was first created, the seven Moons had brought people from seven different worlds into the awakened world, where they had bestowed great gifts upon them. That was an established fact. And yet, what had occurred to Palag went counter to all teachings.

Alright, it was blue, the bishop said. What did the Moon tell you?

Well, he asked me what I wanted to do and if I really wanted to be an awakened. I said yes.

And?

I was in a room without doors or windows. It was made entirely of clouds and had a floating blue rectangle in the middle.

That sounds more like an awakening room. The bishop smiled faintly, as if relieved.

It told me to break it, so I did. Then a purple rectangle appeared.

Its the same thing that he told me, the woman said. He doesnt appear to be lying.

Maybe he isnt. The bishop rubbed his chin. For a Moon to have spoken to him Its interesting, but not enough to keep him here.

I want to stay here. Palag interrupted.

Im sure you do, but the path set for you by the Moons leads you elsewhere. Purple is the color of Galatea. You were chosen by him and soon one of his will come to teach you the way of magic.

Palag didnt understand what the man was saying, but events followed exactly in that fashion. Half a week after his awakening, a visitor came to the monastery. He didnt arrive by horse or foot, but flew down from the sky as if he were a fury. There was no doubt that he was human, and one whose entire being was full of glowing purple.

Where's the boy? he demanded the moment his feet touched the ground.

Palag was too scared to go into the courtyard, so he kept hiding in his room. That was another new thing after his awakening, the monks had moved him somewhere new. In fact, one of the rooms in the bishop's building had been transformed and made into his own.

The bishop will see you immediately, mage, a cleric said. If you'd follow me.

You really want to play this game, do you? It won't end well for you.

Even the Academy won't dare start a fight within a monastery. The cleric didn't back down. You are a guest here, mage, so the bishop has ordered me to make you feel welcome. That won't keep me from taking action should you push your luck.

The commotion abruptly ended. No matter how much Palag concentrated, he wasn't able to hear anything more. The seconds stretched like hours. His pulse quickened more and more, until, without warning, the thing he was most terrified of happened.

The door of his room opened without a sound. An old man in his early thirties stood there, dressed in expensive silk clothes covered by a blue cloak. His glance was cold and merciless, focusing on Palag like a bird of prey on a small rodent.

Bishop? Palag managed to squeak.

The bishop won't disturb us, the man said as he entered the room. He made a point of floating, his feet never touching the floor, as if he were disgusted by it. You aren't something that concerns him.

I'm part of the monastery. The fury found the strength to say.

Were, the man corrected. That ended the moment you were given the magic trait. You're a mage now, or at least you have the potential to become one. The fingers of his right hand moved throughout the air, drawing an intricate pattern. Light filled the room, covering all surfaces until he and Palag were surrounded by a thin glowing bubble. Now we can talk without being overheard.

The mage looked at the single bed in the room. Not finding it to his taste, he cast another spell, causing a throne-like chair to appear a step away.

My name is mage Argus Tisaku. The man gently floated down into the chair. I'm here to take you to the Mage Academy.

I don't want to go. The boy clenched his fists. I want to stay here.

Really? Argus arched a brow. Are you sure?

Yes!

Alright. The mage stood up, his feet remaining a full inch above the ground. Let's test that. He made his way to the boy and reached out. Give me your hand.

Why?

I'm not going to drag you out of here. I just need to dispel some of the lies you've been told so far.

Palag looked at the mans hand. It was flawlessly smooth, with polished nails. The man must have never done a days work in his life. Looking at it was almost like looking at a snake: shiny and lethal.

Scared of this? The mage sighed. If you are, life will be one long nightmare.

The comment was meant as a mockery, but it had its effect. Despite his reluctance, Palag grabbed the mages hand. The moment he did, reality changed.

## **PERSONAL AWAKENING**

The cloud room appeared, along with the glowing blue rectangle within. This time, though, the mage was also present.

A cloud chamber, the man said, nodding as he did. Impressive. Ive never seen one, myself.

Why are you here? The fury recoiled several steps back. Only I can be here.

Havent they told you anything? You can bring people into your realm. Dont worry, youre too low a level to be invaded.

Invaded?

Never mind. It isnt important. The mage turned towards the door. Lets go.

Where?

As far as Palag knew, there was nothing in the corridor. Hed been there several times, but failed to find anything of interest. The first few he hoped hed be able to reclaim the buckler and short sword, but the items stubbornly refused to reappear.

To show you what has been kept hidden.

Curiosity triumphed, urging the fury to follow the man outside the room. A part of him was hoping that something different would happen. Unfortunately, that wasnt the case. The same walled corridor continued on into the distance and there was no indication that any of the items had reemerged.

Told you. The boy mumbled beneath his breath.

Look closer. The mage took a step forward, then without reservation, grabbed a part of the wall and pulled it off.

Palag stared in horror as a new room was revealed before him. Had it always been there? He would have noticed if that were the case. He should have noticed.

Come along. The mage stepped in. The fury rushed behind him, but upon reaching the threshold a feeling of dread swept over him. A voice in his mind whispered that he wasnt supposed to be there, that the room was special and entering risked destroying the entire realm. I said, come along.

The mage turned around and grabbed him by the shoulder. One quick pull, and the boy was inside. Strangely enough, the moment he did, the sensation of fear faded away into nothingness, leaving Palag confused as to why he had been scared to begin with.

See him? Argus pointed at a plump man sitting behind a large desk with documents. It wasn't someone who Palag had seen before, although he did seem familiar somehow. The most distinct of the man was the tunic with the symbol of the Order he was wearing.

Upon hearing the question, the man behind the desk stood up. Scrolls and pieces of paper rose up into the air, but before they could do anything, a zap of purple lightning shot out from the mages hand, causing the other to poof in a cloud of dust.

That, the mage said, as the pieces of paper floated back down, was a limiting echo.

Limiting echo?

Something that keeps you from making your own choices. Echoes could be used for a lot of things, but your Order decided they wanted to use them to put their thoughts in your head. Tell me, have you ever found that there've been things you've done in the past, but forgotten about?

Palag nodded.

Now you know why. The echo fills your head with the things it wants while gently removing everything else. It'll take you a while, but not that it's gone, you'll remember everything that happened since you arrived here. The man turned around, facing the boy. Now, do you still want to remain here? Or are you ready to come with me to the Academy?

Chapter 730: Palag's Story - Vengeance

## **MEMORY FRAGMENT**

### **Mage Academy Learning Hall, 16 years ago**

The room was a lot larger on the inside, as was the structure itself. The notion that an entire city could be packed within a single building was new to Palag. Now that he had the limiting echo removed from his awakening realm, he was able to remember many things that had taken place on the cloud fort he was born on. Clouds had the ability to change shape, as well as expand and contract at will, but they couldn't compare to what magic had achieved.

You'll get used to it, the mage said, floating in front of the series of windows at the far end of the room. In a few weeks, you won't even notice.

Lines of purple light were everywhere, running along the surfaces of everything like glowing threads.

What will I do here? the boy asked.

What do you expect? The mage let out a dry laugh. Study. That's what the Academy is for. You have magic, which means you'll learn how to use it sooner or later. The Academy's task is to make sure you don't kill yourself while learning. He looked at Palag over his shoulder. Or kill others.

The fury turned pale. It had become a lot clearer why the Order had agreed to give him up so easily. It wasn't so much for his benefit, but for theirs. Palag's meddling with unsupervised Moon-given magic probably risked hurting people, even destroying the monastery itself.

Don't worry, though. You'll go through a lot of additional training before you tackle magic. People are aware of your circumstances, so they'll give you a bit more leeway.

Even if I'm a fury?



The magus turned around.

Good to see youre finally asking the important question. Argus smiled. I wont lie to you. Many arent happy with what your kind attempted. Trying to take on the emperor is folly, but that doesnt mean you didnt cause enough chaos. However, even those that despise wont dare harm you. The bond of magic is strong. Its rare that other races receive the gift, especially non-humans. Youll be given every opportunity to rise among the ranks. What you do with that opportunity is up to you.

And study Palag did. At first, it was slow and difficult. What had been started at the monastery was continued at a neck-breaking pace. A week was deemed more than adequate for him to learn all the intricacies of human reading, writing, and advanced vocabulary, not to forget several other disciplines. In order to achieve the impossible, mage Argus had given the fury a library ringa realm containing more scrolls and books than a normal person could read in a lifetime. And to assist the studying process, an echo was also placed there. Unlike the limiting echo of the Order, this one acted as a tutor, giving tasks and being strict about it. Also, the echo belonged to the very same mage that had brought him here.

Weeks of true time passed, then months. Palag felt stretched to such a degree that it gradually became his standard existence. The real world was only used to eating, drinking, sleep and necessary bodily functions. Everything else was done in the awakening realms.

In a single year, the fury had learned the history of the realm, the Academy, three separate languagesincluding nymph and dryadas well as mathematics, scores of bestiaries, and enough combat to know what to do in a fight. However, he hadnt been taught a single spell.

One day, Palag got tired of waiting. Making his way through the corridors of the learning hall, he walked to the building of mage Argus Tisaku and walked in. Three apprentices were present in the outer lobby. All of them looked at the boy, though no one stopped him in any way.

I was wondering when youd get the guts to come here, Argus voice came from the walls themselves. Slightly disappointing. I had hoped youd be here months ago.

You could have told me, mage, Palag said in a calm tone. When you told me Id have a lot to learn, I expected part of it to be magic.

You think youre ready to learn magic?

Its the only thing I can learn. Im a level one. I cannot increase my awakening level without losing my magic. And with the number of improvements I could do per day, it would be decades before I increase my traits through achievements.

Number of improvements? The mage emerged on top of the lobbys staircase. You can only do one.

Only if I dont draw in magic from my surroundings. When I absorb enough threads, I can do up to five.

One of the apprentices choked in his attempt to stifle a laugh.

Five? Well done. But yes, not enough to grant you many achievements.

Palag gritted his teeth. If he were a noble, hed be level ten by now, possibly even level twenty. It didnt take him long living in the Academy to see how the world worked. Noble families would use

their wealth and power to boost the magic traits of their children through trinkets or gifts from less prosperous apprentices. Once enough were amassed, they'd have the children boost the awakening level to whatever point it was deemed appropriate. The library echo had even mentioned a way that could skip the process entirely, resulting in a noble child gaining ten levels of awakening without decreasing their magic trait. If Palag were to try, though, he'd lose his single level of magic and with that, his place at the Academy.

You really feel ready?

The fury nodded.

Alright. Come here.

Knowing what was to follow, Palag floated above the ground, mimicking the general behavior of his mentor and made his way up the staircase. One thing was needed for him to be officially considered the apprentice: the same thing that would take part of his freedom away: the novice seal. The intricate brand of magic would remain on his skin until the day he gained enough skill and power to remove it from himself, thus graduating to apprentice.

Minutes later, the boy was given a new schedule. Learning in the ring's realm was no longer considered enough. In addition to that, he had to start going to classes with other novices to learn the basics of magic.

The first moment he set foot in class, Palag could barely contain his joy. It was as if he had finally reached the prize he had longed so long for. It was only after a few hours that he found out how boring it all was. The vast secrets of magic remained just as far away as before. The single topic of study were trivialities he had learned in the ring library months ago. The only difference was that this time, he had been handed artefacts to help build up his magic, and build it up, Palag did.

Within a week he had already boosted his magic trait to five, promoting him to a rank two novice. He was quickly moved to a different class, where he had to learn slightly more complicated topics. That also wasn't remotely challenging. By the end of the month, the fury was already a rank three, focusing on spells many times more complicated than the rest of his class. Yet, no matter how many times he asked his mentor to allow him to join apprentice classes, he was denied.

Meanwhile, his rapid advancement had increasingly become the subject of envy. Normally, when a novice displayed excellence, they were praised by others. Either due to his nature, or his distant attitude, that didn't hold true for Palag. Nearly no one spoke to him, and those that did only insulted him. No one dared to enter into a fight. Palag's natural magic was more than enough to deal with any novice and even a few apprentices.

The only mild amusement came from completing training trials. That was an area the fury excelled at. Regardless if he had to face a vortex guardian or solve a riddle, Palag would breeze through, increasing his magic trait in the process. Once he reached the twenty-limit barrier, he lost interest in that as well.

Gradually, he started going less and less to class until, at one point, he stopped going altogether. There was no punishment; learning remained a voluntary process, especially for one who had excelled above everyone else.

People started to notice. Rumors started spreading that he had removed his seal, lost his magic, or been punished for unspecified crimes. After a full week, mage Argus went to his room for a visit.

A portal of purple emerged on one of the rooms walls, through which the figure of the mage slowly floated in. This time, he allowed himself to touch the ground with his feet.

They say youve removed your seal, the mage said, looking in Palags general direction. Is it true?

The fury raised his right arm so that his fist was clearly visible. There were no marks on it.

Impressive. I would have thought it would take you a few more years.

The seal was flawed. Palag replied. You didnt cast it on my skin. I still unraveled it.

An easy task for someone used with natural magic. They say that fury mages were second only to nymphs. A smile cracked across Argus face. Or copyettes. Glad to see you arent one of them.

This caught Palags attention.

The copyettes were banished, he said.

Were they?

It said so in the library ring.

A lot of things are said, not all are true. He took a step closer. Its said that a novice who removes his brand is made an apprentice. Do you feel like one? Another step. Its also said that the fury leaders had come with an agreement with the first Tamin emperor never to fight each other. Did that stop you from attacking?

Threads of blue emerged from the mage, spreading throughout the room. It wasnt a spell that Palag was familiar with. There didnt seem to be any hand gestures, or even the slightest of movement. It was as if the mage knew a different way of casting spells.

Within seconds, a mesh of blue had surrounded the room, like a prison.

You dont like it here, do you? the mage asked. You didnt like the monastery and didnt like the order.

Palag crossed his arms. He couldnt say he hated it, but he didnt particularly like it, either. Most of all, though, he disliked the emperor. Without a limiting echo to quell his anger, the boy hated what had happened to him because of the war.

You dont like mages, do you? The mage was standing no more than a foot away.

They destroyed my home. They destroyed my family.

Then why dont you destroy them? The questions were shocking in an alluring sort of way. The Academy is strong, and so is the empire, but cracks are forming. For now, theyre too small to be noticed, but its inevitable that theyll grow. Youve read the scrolls I gave you. Every few generations, a group gains enough power to rebel against the emperor.

And they all fail.

Correct. However, that's only because the pillars of the empire were there to protect him. The archdukes, the imperial army, and most of all, the Academy have been there to prop him up when needed. But, tell me, what will happen if the Academy falls?

Cold exaltation swept through Palag's body. It was almost too good to be true.

You're planning to destroy the Academy?

It's not as difficult as one would think. This place is a nest of vipers that are at each other's throats. Sooner or later, an opportunity will arise, and when it does, people like me will take advantage. The bigger question is the side you will choose.

The offer was worth considering. One could almost consider it a trap, if Palag was significant enough to be trapped. Yet, if the offer was true

What do you want me to do?

Take this. The mage handed Palag a small metal bead.

What is it?

Just a piece of metal. There's a symbiotic echo. The moment you link your realms, it will become a permanent guest.

Like the one the monastery gave me

No, not like the one from the monastery. This one will let you take advantage of all my knowledge, which means you'll be able to cast all the spells I know, in addition to your own.

All the spells, you know? That was a lot of knowledge, a lot of power.

There's just one catch. The echo allows me to keep an eye on you, and if you try anything, I'll take you over like a puppet. A little insurance on my part.

It was more than a little insurance, but ultimately it didn't matter. It would give Palag everything he wanted. It was all just a matter of time.