

Leveling up 731

Chapter 731: One Valid Option

The memory slowly faded away, returning Dallion back to the real world. Things hadn't completely worked out as Dallion expected them to; he had managed to use his empathy trait to peek into his enemy's past, just not the one he had originally planned. Looking back, it was logical that the trait would affect the person in front of him, not the echo within. Nonetheless, he had obtained quite a bit of useful information. Now all he had to do was make use of it.

You aren't even a mage, are you? Dallion said, trying to appear more confident than he was. You're just a limiting echo that's taken control of Palag while your original is hidden somewhere away with the rest of your little group, like common cowards.

There was no need to use magic skills; mages' egos were large and easily bruised.

He's not the only one with an echo inside. Palag frowned. You're nothing but pawns fighting on a dying field.

The fury's fingers moved to cast a spell. Unlike before, the motion was noticeably slower. Dallion's instances spread out in all directions, as a bolt of lightning emerged, evaporating half of them out of existence. There was no question that the spell was more powerful than anything Dallion could manage. Still, puppet and puppeteer were no longer in sync. As much as Palag wanted the Academy to fall, he hated being referred to as a pawn even more.

Grasping the opportunity, Dallion cast two quick spells, sending aether projectiles at the fury. The attack wasn't even strong enough to be a distraction. Long before they reached their intended target, a semi-transparent sphere surrounded Palag. Ripples of light spread along it each time a projectile smashed into its surface, causing no harm to the fury whatsoever.

While that was happening, Dallion did a spark-infused line attack. It too was countered almost instantly with several dozen layers of aether barriers.

Nil, can I cast spells with my hair? Dallion drew the silver glass sword out from his realm, doing a double line attack.

No, the echo said flatly. It's not something humans can do, not even mages.

Damn it!

Dallion was hoping there was a way. He was no match for mage Argus, even while there was discord between him and his apprentice. If he could get close, maybe he would have a chance using his combat skills.

Gem, are you done with the healing? Dallion asked mentally.

Err, no, boss, the aetherfish familiar replied from within Dallion's realm.

How much is left?

Umm, I can stop healing now. If I do, I'll die. I'm not very strong as I am now. My healing spells aren't as strong as those of boss Lux.

It was instinct for every being to focus on its survival before anything else. However, Dallion immediately suppressed such thoughts. He had no intention of leaving a child to die. It wasn't Phoils fault that he had been made into a pawn. It wasn't Palag's fault either, though merely subduing him didn't seem to be an option.

Ruby, get back here! Dallion ordered, continuing with his attacks.

The series of line attacks had caught both Palag and the mage controlling him by surprise. No doubt they had faced the occasional awakened who'd tried that on them, occasionally maybe even filled with spark. However, Dallion had managed to build up his strength to the point he could perform many such strikes in rapid succession. Combining that with his newly developed ability to regain stamina through magic, he was good for another fifty attacks, maybe more.

Ruby! Dallion shouted again.

A short distance away, the ruby shadfly moved away from the green swarm, quickly descending towards the ground. None of the other insects followed. Several more imperial golems had appeared, systematically reclaiming the area around the Learning Hall. Although limited in many aspects, they ensured an insect-free area around them, saving the few key structures that were left standing. It was almost tempting to say that it was a matter of time before the mages were victorious, yet each time they would gain the upper hand in one area, a new patch of land would collapse like a sinkhole, releasing tens of thousands of shardflies into the air.

Maintaining sixty instances, Dallion kept on attacking, all the time making sure that the Palag wouldn't become the target of the fury's attacks. There were a few cases in which the fury caught wind of what he was doing. Fortunately, like most mages, Palag wasn't particularly good at combat splitting. The death of Ruby never came to pass, and the creature safely made its way to Dallion's shoulder.

Not yet, Dallion whispered, quickly casting a multiplication spell with one hand. The silver glass sword wasn't making things easy, but Dallion couldn't afford to let it go. This wasn't a realm, so any dropped item wouldn't be easily retrievable.

Within seconds, a flow of shardflies emerged, streaming from the original like water from a tap. That was good, but it was also only half of the problem.

Look out! the shield shouted moments before an imperial golem charged at Dallion.

Instinct took over. Dallion blocked the strike, only to be thrown back by the sheer force of the blow. Splitting into a new set of instances, Dallion twisted around, ready to meet the construct head on. The action rendered his back exposed to Palag.

Dont, Dallion thought.

All it would take was for the fury to cast a spell the next few seconds for the battle to end here and now. Fake shardflies flew into the magic sphere surrounding Palag, shattering like hail on stone. With one of his instances, Dallion turned around. For a split second, he and the fury looked at each other, their view unobstructed by insects.

Dallion prepared for the worst. In his mind, he could see the lightning charring him, bringing the end of his life. The moment never came. Instead, he received another punch from the golem, sending him past the fury.

That simple miscalculation changed everything. From facing two invincible enemies, Dallion was now left with none. Determined to destroy the shardflies, the golem was attacking everything in his path. Unable to withstand a direct attack from the construct, the mage controlling Palag had no choice but to fight back.

Sadly, the fight didnt last long. For several seconds, the golem one aether shield after another in his effort to destroy the illusionary shardflies. While he did, both hands of the fury moved so fast that it looked as if there were eight of them. A single spell was cast, composed of so many circles that it resembled a solid sphere.

A ray of purple light erupted, melting through the torso of the golem, as if it were made of soft wax. The beam continued on, scorching a hole through the swarms of shardflies and even the clouds it managed to reach.

Droplets of cold sweat formed on Dallions forehead. The only time he had seen anything similar was in Jirohs memories, back when the cloud citadel had been destroyed.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

The scene shifted again, taking Dallion into the safety of his realm.

Damn it! he yelled.

There had been a moment during which he thought he had leveled the playing field. He was so far from it that it was laughable.

Even a gifted novice cannot defeat a master, Nil said, leaning against one of Dallions skill pillars. Despite what you think of him, Argus is rather skilled. More skilled than any of the otherworlders youve seen.

Dallion didnt know what to say. With his limited knowledge, he believed the mage to be the same level as Katka and Enroy.

Is he stronger than Alien?

Alien is unparalleled at scheming, but when it comes to it, hes rather weak. Sure, hes capable of wonders in his field, but in direct combat the echo waved a hand. Argus was a battlemage. In broad terms, hes one of those the Academy sends when something large needs punishing.

He shot down the cloud citadel.

Ironic, isnt it? An Academy battlemage using a fury orphaned by his actions in order to exact vengeance against the organization that made him what he was. A [it that there isnt a bard of scholar to memories of the event. Its the thing that poems are made of.

Dallion remained motionless as a statue.

He wasnt the only one. Over a dozen battlemages were sent, all as monstrous as him. Its little wonder that the powers that be decided that changes were needed. Some of the battlemages received

promotions, others were sent to face other threats, some were even sent to the edges of the world. The emperor was smart enough not to keep them in the same place. However, his strength made him overconfident. Not once did he consider that the battlemages might get together and even reunite with all sorts of rogue and banished elements to rebel against him. To be honest, neither did I.

What? You made a deal with them! What do you mean you

We all had our own priorities. And to be honest, I'm still uncertain they'll succeed. Tamin emperors have been through a lot, and don't forget that the Order is yet to react. They're remaining quiet for now, but should the rebel mages gain the upper hand, they'll rush to offer a helping hand to the capital.

The constant game of politics, even amid this chaos.

Is there a way to defeat him? Dallion asked.

Argus? Of course, there is. You have to be faster, stronger, and know more spells. Short of that, no. None of your familiars will be of any use. Even dragons won't be of any use. You've seen what Katka did to one of them? Well, she tried to become a battlemage and was rejected for being too weak, or not strong enough as is the polite way of saying it.

Hopelessness gave way to anger, then desperation again. If Dallion had acted earlier and found the reason for him being cursed, all this might have been avoided. He could have asked for the Moon's help, or even Aethers although after everything that had happened, that was looking less than likely.

If you fight, you'll lose. If you run, hell catch you. Nil continued. Your best chance would be to offer what he asks. It might sound silly to you, but Argus would prefer not having me as an enemy if he could avoid it.

Because you're so strong? Each of Dallion's words was soaked with bitterness.

Not as much as I was, but enough, especially now that I got a lot of my devices back. I know it's the last thing you want to hear, but take the loss. No one will blame you. You'll live to learn and grow stronger. Who knows, in a decade or so you might be the next archmage and rebuild the Academy.

So far, Dallion had heard a lot of tempting offers. This wasn't one of them. While being able to cast spells was nice, he never wanted to make a career of being a mage. Being a top tier hunter was more than enough, not that it was an option anymore. Even if he did survive through this and was forgiven, the world would be plunged into more chaos than the Star would have caused. At least Arthurows wanted to remove magic from the world and unite its inhabitants under his benevolent rule. If both the Academy and the Tamin Empire fell, everyone would rush to fill the vacuum with such ferocity that even the Order would be swept away.

Be reasonable, dear boy. You're out of options.

Desperation wrecked Dallion's mind. He could hear each and every separate thought screaming in his head. Questions, curses, advice, screams of self-pity they kept going on and on, until suddenly one voice made a suggestion, causing all of them to cease.

No, Dallion said, a calm expression returning to his face. I have one option. He walked to the pillar that contained his spellcraft skills. I don't have to fight alone.

If you're thinking of Harp, she can't help you in the real world. It would take a Moon to allow a banished to return.

Not Harp, Dallion whispered. Something else.

Chapter 732: Moonstone Apprentice

Several things were wrong with what Dallion planned to do, not least of which was the potential reaction of the Moons. Already being in their bad books, this had a chance of getting at least one of them really furious. On the other hand, even the Moons had to follow their own rules.

Please let this slide, Dallion thought as he dashed towards the large glowing cluster of Moonstone within his realm. I'll pay the price, just give me a bit of time to see this through.

He knew that the Moons could hear his thoughts. The question was whether they would punish him for it. That was one of the tricky things when it came to deities. Sometimes their punishment was swift, other times it took months or even years for the effects of their wrath to become noticeable.

Splitting, Dallion looked over his shoulder, half expecting Nil to see Nil rushing behind him in an attempt to stop him. The old echo had done no such thing. That made things a bit easier.

Upon reaching the Moonstone, Dallion stopped. Purple crystals, the size of high-rises, reached up to the sky. They had definitely grown a lot since the last time Dallion had checked. There was no telling whether that was a good or bad thing. Ultimately, it didn't matter.

Galatea Dallion placed his hand on the smooth surface. The material resonated, sending vibrations through his whole arm.

Sorry, Dallion whispered. I'll need that boost.

Dallion extended the magic threads through his fingers, then pulled.

The magic within the Moonstone felt like pure electric current. Dallion felt the raw energy sweep through him. The pain was combined with a euphoric high, wanting him to crave more while simultaneously wanting to pull away. He'd only experienced the sensation once when absorbing the magic of an aether whale in the Moons domain. The power he had briefly achieved had been out of this or any other world; even so, compared to what he was pouring into him now, it felt like rotten candy.

In the blink of an eye, Dallion remembered all the spells he'd seen, not only the one memorized through diligent toil and study, but anything he'd seen since the moment he'd entered this world. He could easily cast the spells Alien had performed during the Nerosal Festival—not that they were particularly useful—Katkas combat repertoire, and also everything Palag had done. Magic that had seemed too fast and complicated now appeared childishly simple.

Magic kept flowing into Dallion, turning the sky and sea of his realm purple. In the distance, the Vermillion lifted its massive head, frightened by the sudden change. Seeing it was Dallion who had initiated it, the island serpent quickly submerged.

There's no need to be scared, Dallion said. The power of the Purple Moon had also boosted many of his other abilities. He was able to hear the thoughts of every entity within his realm. Several of them knew exactly what he was doing, but even they were frightened, like all the rest.

Its alright, Dallion thought. This was necessary if he were to defeat his opponent in the real world no different from getting a level boost before fighting a chainling, or so he kept telling himself.

Time burst like threads of spaghetti. Dallion kept absorbing the Moonstone for hours, while simultaneously being done three six seconds after he started. This wasnt a case of instances; both realities were just as true, as were the hundreds of others in between.

Magic, Dallion whispered with a smile. The universal exception.

There was no longer a trace of the crystal cluster. Dallion looked at his hand. It was so full of magic that he could no longer see the threads within it. Instead, his entire skin glowed purple, as if it were made of it.

Turning around, he expected to see all the inhabitants of his realm gathered there. However, there were only three: Nil, Harp, and Vihrogon.

I have to admit, youve really outdone yourself this time, the old echo said.

In a good or a bad way? Dallion lowered his hand.

Frankly, I dont have the slightest idea. Id never have dreamed of using a Moonstone in such fashion.

Oh?

I doubt any mage would. You had an item that could be the answer to any question, and you used it for a temporary boost.

Dallion couldnt see the logic. His music skills clearly showed that the echo wasnt lying or exaggerating, and yet that didnt make sense. Argus hadnt given him any alternative. Even if Dallion agreed to surrender, hed still have to give the Moonstone away.

How long is temporary? he asked.

No idea. This is undiscovered territory. Maybe five minutes, maybe a few hours. Not much.

Minutes. That still allowed him to learn a few hundred spells, provided Nil and Harp cast them very, very fast.

Teach me a spell, Dallion said. Something usef

REALM EXPULSION

A green rectangle appeared, pulling Dallion out of his own realm. Not too far away, the aftereffects of Palags destructive ray were still unfolding.

Nil? Dallion asked.

This wasnt the first time he had been thrown out of a domain. To happen while being in his personal realm, though, made it clear that the Moons were involved. Seems like they had resorted to the Judgement of Solomon: Dallion had been allowed to make use of the Moonstone, though not receive any advice while containing that power. Still, it could have been a lot worse.

Ruby, Lux, get out of here! he ordered, removing all his guardian gear. Ill take care of this on my own.

What have you done? the mage shouted through Palags voice. The pain in his words was palpable, as if hed witnessed the utter destruction of his hopes and dreams. You you

Just leveling the playing field, Dallion bluffed with a smile.

Youll pay for this!

It seemed that the offer for surrender had just been withdrawn. Palag started casting a spellthe same spell he had cast moments ago, only this time, Dallion was going to be the primary target.

Instinctively, Dallion did the same. He had seen that no manner of defense barrier would be able to match such destructive power. According to his physics class knowledge, a ray of equal strength would or so one could hope.

Four sets of fingers moved in identical fashion, giving birth to power that could sink islands. Dallions movements were slightly faster, but hed started with a slight delay, causing his spell to be released moments later. There had been no time for combat splitting, all his mental energy was focused on spellcraft and spellcraft alone.

Two rays of purple light flew at each other, clashing five feet from Dallion. Had standard physics been in play, the power released from the clash would have been enough to vaporize him and everything else in a substantial radius. Since this was magic, no such thing followed. Both rays formed a single line, then vanished just as fast as they had emerged.

That was too close for comfort, which was why Dallion immediately started casting a repeat of the spell. This time he intended to be first. Palag wasted no time either, casting a completely different spell. Thanks to his boosted state, Dallion recognized it being a summoning spell. As far as he knew, there was no creature capable of withstanding such destructive power. Still, he was going to find out.

Once again, the spells were completed simultaneously. A ray of destruction shot in the direction of the fury, only to have it hit the walls of a semi-transparent tower that had risen from the ground. The construct wasnt able to stop the beam, but managed to deflect it, causing it to shoot straight up.

A reflection trick? Dallion wondered. That seemed too simple for a battle mage.

Acting on a hunch, he concentrated, combining his magic vision with zoology. The experiment worked. Deep down, beneath the ground, he could feel the presence of a creatureone that wasnt supposed to be there, or in this reality, for that matter.

The chameleon, Dallion hissed.

The creature didnt seem to be in a particularly good condition. Being forced to change reality throughout the area had probably tired him significantly even before Dallions last attack. Concentrating further, Dallion was able to spot a dozen of brands covering the chameleons bodyrestrictions to keep him obedient and confined to the real world.

Thats how you control him, Dallion thought. Sneaky and efficient. The sight also reminded him of his own seal. In theory, it wasnt supposed to have any effect

outside the learning hall, but why take the risk? With a swift action, Dallion grabbed hold of the brant, pulling it off his skin as if it were a loose thread. He couldn't say he knew exactly what he was doing, but rather followed his intuition.

MAGE APPRENTICESHIP

(+2 Reaction)

Through skills and knowledge, you removed the obstacle keeping you from joining the ranks of apprentices. Or, at least, you would have if you hadn't cheated your way there! Still, a pass is a pass.

Not now. Dallion waved through the purple rectangle that had emerged. Achievements could wait, the fight to the death couldn't.

You're magic, Dallion heard a distant whisper.

He quickly recognized it belonged to Ruby. It was followed by a chorus of others. It was not clear that the novice seal had done more than change his appearance into that of a child during class; it had also strongly diminished the effects of his empathy trait. With it gone, and thanks to his boosted magic state, Dallion could hear millions of voices. No, not voices he could hear thoughts. He knew what every single one of the shardflies was doing, he could taste their anger, their determination to protect their nests, and their false conviction that they had been here before. In some other reality, that might well have been the case, not this one, though. The reality chameleon, under mage Argus orders, had seen to it that both realities merged, creating the current mess. Both sides refused to surrender what they viewed as theirs and were willing to go to any length to achieve victory, leaving Argus and his group free to aim at bigger, unsuspecting targets.

Clever, Dallion waved his left hand through the air. In his present state, that was enough to cast a dozen spells, sending hundreds of aether projectiles at the fury. It almost worked.

It worked. The mage couldn't keep himself from having the last word, even as his puppet was busy casting barriers by the dozen. I just need to attack. I just need to keep you here.

That sounded exactly like what the platypain had said.

But if I manage to kill you before the Moonstone wears off, I might be able to salvage something.

Then let's make things interesting, Dallion thought.

It wasn't much effort to cast a flight spell. Dallion had spent weeks trying to learn the symbols that went into it, to little avail. Now, they came naturally, allowing him to rise into the air with little effort. Dallion had to constantly maintain the spell with one handflying was not as free as it seemed but that was a minor inconvenience.

Shardflies, he thought, combining spellcraft, linguistics, and zoology.

It would have been faster to cast a mass telepathy spell, but that was one more thing Dallion didn't know how to do yet. Besides, if he did, he wouldn't be able to use another skill.

There's no point in keeping this up, Dallion said, using music skills. You've already started to lose, and even if you do, more mages and golems would come.

Then what? Abandon our nests? A chorus of voices asked.

Your nests were never here. Help me and Ill find your nests. And if I cant, Ill find you a place where you could make new ones. I vow to the Moons that Ive done it before.

The attitude of the entire swarm changed. Instead of attacking anything in sight, as they had been doing till now, massive groups of shardflies pulled back away from the unprotected buildings.

Seeing the shift in attitude, the mages were smart enough to deescalate the situation. None were convinced that the fight had ended, but welcomed the pause to regroup and assess the situation, if nothing more.

A reality chameleon caused your nests to exist where they shouldnt, but there are plenty of places in the wilderness just as good and without mages.

What will you want from us? Several dozen voices asked likely the shardfly ringleaders.

I just need to save the mage that rules over this place, Dallion said. And also beat up the one who caused the reality chameleon to bring you here.

All shardflies darted in Dallions direction. Their glee was so intense he could scoop it from the air with a spoon.

Chapter 733: Shardfly Master

Shardflies, like all creatures of the wilderness, were capable of a great many things more than people could imagine, more than the creatures themselves knew. In his current state, Dallion was able to get a glimpse of all of them. Earth knowledge combined with magic and zoology, allowing him to command them to gather onto him, creating an almost impregnable living armor. There was no longer any need to cast spells to cast barriers or fly the shardflies did that for him as Dallion issued commands as effortlessly as moving his own body.

The fury puppet fighting him kept on casting spell after spell in an attempt to find some weakness of Dallions to exploit, but each of them was countered. Yet, with each passing second, the intensity of the attacks decreased. Apart from being the perfect emerald shield as well as his personal tornado of razor blades, the shardflies were also conductive to magic.

It had taken moments for Dallion to figure that out something so simple that it should have been obvious months ago. All was just another reason why mages craved Moonstones so much. One could only imagine what could be achieved using them as a power source of magic. Part of Dallion wished hed left a fragment to try, but even if given a chance, he wouldnt deprive himself from the current sensation. It was more than confidence, more than euphoria. Right now, he felt as if someone had removed the barriers of the impossible, creating a world of endless possibilities. With a bit of effort, he could probably create his own awakening shrine, not that it was going to be of much use to him. The principle was clear. All he needed were the raw materials which could be obtained in bulk from the Glass Mounts. For the moment, though, he had to deal with the annoying fly that was trying to keep him as well as its puppet.

Magic spread from his fingers, moving through the layers of shardflies covering his body. When there were no more, it shot out like a dryad vine, hitting one of the insects in the air, before jumping to the next. Threads of magic extended in all directions. Shardflies moved about, forming symbols

in the air itself, composing multiple five-circle spells without issue. Dallion would have done a lot more, but five-level spells were all he knew. Nil was right unlimited power given to a novice was a bit of a waste. Then again, Dallion had other skills to take advantage of.

Whats the plan? he asked using his music skills. The connection was almost instant, no longer affected by Palags defenses.

You know the plan, the fury replied. No sooner had he done so, than his fingers moved, casting a new spell to cancel the music suggestion.

Cheeky, Dallion thought.

Fighting echo-controlled opponents presented an interesting problem. Apart from being physically safe, Argus had also created an information filter of sorts. Palag only knew what he had been told, and if mages were any indication, that was far from the final plan. Still, there would be a few morsels available.

Dallion split into three hundred instances.

Are you a cultist?

Nine times out of ten, Palag replied no. In the remaining cases, though, he said yes.

Youve been keeping secrets, Dallion thought.

That was as gutsy as it was unusual. It was easy to use blocker items to stop the influence of echoes. Putting one on, while under the control of a symbiotic echo, was another matter. Echoes never slept, they were never distracted. The echo must have known about the blocker item the moment the fury thought about it. Or was the mage a Star-cultist as well?

Do you want the Star to rise again? Dallion asked.

In the various instances, the fury responded in different fashion. In twenty-one, the answer was identical.

A new Star will rise. Palag broke free from the echos influence. His voice was the same as it was before. That Star

Thick purple threads shot out from his body, wrapping him up like a cocoon. Instead of providing protection, however, they tightened more and more, leading to an audible crunch. Argus hadnt been lying when hed warned Palag not to do anything he would disapprove of.

Dallion was tempted to choose one of those instances to become reality. It would mean an end to the fight. Besides, there was a question that the fury deserved it. He was a Star cultist, and as such would do everything in his power to bring a new abomination to the world. Yet the memory fragment remained fresh in Dallions mind. Palag had been a child once, going through things that would twist anyone. Killing him might well turn out to be the only option, but right now he didnt want to be the one doing it.

Whats the plan? Dallion asked again, choosing one of the instances in which the fury remained alive and splitting again. Even if you win here, you cant defeat the emperor.

Is that what our old friend told you? The mage laughed, using the furys body. Like all the rest, hes barely seen the emperor, but still trembles at the mention of his name.

And you have?

Many times. When theres a problem that needs sorting, the emperor doesnt go to the archmage, he never has. Archmages are snakes that have the power to control the petty bureaucracy of this place. Battle mages do the real work. We fight armies, dragons, and all the aether that end up here.

Palag began casting his death ray spell, though too slowly to match Dallions present speed. One mass attack from several thousands of shardflies, and half of the furys index finger was cut off. The wound wasnt by any means serious, but it disrupted the spell before it could be completed, forcing Palag back on the defensive.

Thats one reason they were kept apart, Nil grumbled from within Dallions realm. After a while, they inevitably get delusions of grandeur and try something stupid. If I were still in charge, this would never have happened.

Looks like its been going on long before the current one took over, Dallion said calmly. Such thoughts dont appear overnight.

Its part of their nature to feel underappreciated. Half the Academy does. The trick is not to let them get to a position to do something about it. I can point out the many mistakes that made this possible, but it would hardly matter.

At first, Dallion thought that the echo was lying. There was no way that Adzorg was that careless or nave. And still, there he couldnt detect a single lie of exaggeration. The old echo believed in what it was saying. That meant that the ex-archmage had been blind sighted, same as the emperor.

As much as I enjoy this conversation, Id suggest you wrap things up as fast as possible. Your power comes with an expiration date, and more imperial golems are on the way. It would take a while for all of them to get here, but they will, and as things stand, you are their primary target.

Dallion currently had the power to take all of the golems on, but he conceded the point. There was no point in making a greater mess of things. His best course of action was to finish this quickly, then get to the archmages chambers, wherever they were, and foil Argus plans.

Splitting again, Dallion circled Palag with his instances and ordered him to surrender. The music skills let the notion enter the furys thought, but it was quickly severed by the puppet master. Even with nine and a half fingers, the fury could easily cast even complicated spells.

Finding the effort mildly annoying, Dallion tried again. Five hundred simultaneous attempts were made to get his opponent to faint or surrender, and same as before, none of them were successful.

So stubborn, Dallion thought. If this were a realm, hed simply have ended everything by creating fifty echoes of himself. Sadly, the real world didnt allow this sort of action or did it?

Concentrating, Dallion pictured creating an echo. Ten minutes ago, he'd have discarded the idea as utterly impossible. The Moonstone, though, had broadened his horizons; plus, it wasn't just any Moonstone, but the Moonstone of Magic and had the power to create exceptions even within reality.

If a reality chameleon can do it, why not I? Dallion thought. And to his own astonishment, he succeeded.

His body stretched, then split apart, like a single cell organism. The shardflies moved aside, barely confused by the change. Since appearing in this world, they had become accustomed to changes that defied normal logic.

Alas, no sooner had the echo appeared in the real world than it vanished away, breaking up into a cloud of magic dust.

A lot more experience is needed to create echoes in the real world,

Nil said.

Dallion could sense that the echo was no less astonished than him, but also marginally terrified. More than likely there was an intricate spell that made that possible, though not one a Novice would know. However, Dallion didn't need full echoes for what he was thinking. All he needed were a thousand mouths or, more specifically, a thousand sources of sound. Those he had in abundance.

The massive swarm of shardflies spread out again, forming a giant sphere around Palag. Hundreds of feet separated the creatures from the fury.

Palag suspected something, so he cast a new spell—the same one Raven had done within the Moon's Realm. Bolts of lightning shot out from him, draining the magic from everything they touched. Shardflies fell to the ground by the thousands, creating massive holes in the living sphere, yet it was already too late.

Hundreds of spells were cast simultaneously. Initially, there didn't seem to be any change. That was, until a single command was issued, coming from thousands of places all at once.

Submit! Dallion said through his proxies, using all his music skills.

The command was like a shockwave, causing the fury's mind to freeze up. In that single moment, not even the mage echo could issue him any orders. Palag froze in place, remaining motionless mid-air. The air currents keeping him in the air disappeared, sending him falling down.

Cocoon him, Dallion ordered.

Thousands of shardflies broke off from the swarm, flocking onto the fury. Before he hit the ground, they had already covered him completely, restricting all movement. Inches from the ground, there were enough of them to lift him back up, safely away from any potential aether golems.

Let him breathe, but restrict his mouth and fingers, Dallion said.

Why? He brought our nests here to be destroyed.

Not him, but the one controlling him, Dallion clarified. Dig out the chameleon as well. As long as you keep those two incapacitated and far from any golems, you should be fine.

The shardflies weren't exceedingly pleased, but they followed Dallion's constructions. Everything else aside, they could feel the power emanating from him, and as most creatures of the wilderness, they knew when they were facing a fight, they couldn't win.

Nil, which way to the archmage? he asked.

Are you absolutely certain about this? The echo persisted. I'll tell you if that's what you want, but this is your chance to just walk away. No one will go after you, if you do. Argus and others might be there. He's seen what you're capable of, so it won't be as easy facing him as it was dealing with his apprentice.

That's what I'm counting on. I'm ending this right now and it won't even take me a minute.

Let's hope you have that long Nil said beneath his breath. Very well. Face north and cast the anti-illusion spell I taught you. A new cluster of buildings should appear. That's where the archmage lives now.

An illusion? Made sense that someone living in a nest of deceit and paranoia would resort to such measures. Using his shardflies, Dallion cast the spell. Not too far away, a cluster of square-shaped buildings formed. This was where Dallion had to go.

Chapter 734: The Archmage's Complex

Typical of Valerian to do something like this, Nil said, words dripping with disapproval. He always was easily impressed and with a terrible sense of aesthetic.

Looking at the cluster of buildings below, Dallion couldn't argue. What had seemed like square structures turned out to be a recreation of a modern twenty-century building complex. The architects had started with the basic idea, but added a few local features to make the whole thing more palatable. Ultimately, they had failed, creating a monstrosity that combined the worst elements of both.

Blocks of flats between from two to five stories high were glued together, creating a monolithic whole. Here and there bridges linked the more distant ones, looking like external appendixes, and just as useless. It took talent to come up with something simultaneously so grotesque and dysfunctional.

How'd he come up with that? Dallion asked.

Probably Aliens doing. Despite his many flaws, Valerian had a thing for otherworlders. That's why I took him under my wing.

Well, that cost you a lot.

His father was an otherworlder, and a very good friend of mine. Nil paused. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

That changed things a lot. Putting friends and family in positions of power wasn't exclusive to this world, though apparently things ended up just as catastrophically here as well.

What happened to him?

Im not sure. One day, he vanished. It hit a few people quite hard, though ten times as many were pleased to see him go. You see, he was a noble.

Right. Just the usual, then.

Actually, it was anything but usual. Disposing of a rival is rather normal in noble circles. Not hearing about the hows and whys thats a different matter.

A circle of aether golems surrounded the building. There were no less than twenty of them, although far less powerful than the imperial ones Dallion had recently faced. The archmage likely was paranoid enough to have his own ones made, even if they could be destroyed with a tenth of the effort.

Still under the effects of the Moonstone, Dallion could see the spells and symbols on them clearly. They were obviously made for intimidation rather than anything else. Even now, they remained perfectly motionless while Dallion was hovering fifty feet above.

Dallion concentrated on the buildings using his magic vision. There were four layers of protective spells, their magic symbols glowing bright purple on walls and rooftops. Initially, the builders had started out diligently, ensuring that nothing harmful could enter undetected. As more buildings had been added to the complex, they had slacked off, though, putting in less and less effort to the point that multiple weak spots had emerged. By the looks of it, the archmage relied on his authority and the massive illusion spell to keep enemies away.

Back in my day, Id never have resorted to all this. Nil continued his grumbling. So much wasted time, and it isnt even good.

There were barely two magic stick-figures in the entire complex, located in a small building just off the center. The layers of symbols prevented Dallion from making out specifics, but he could tell that one was rather powerful, while the other was at novice-level at most.

Nil, how many people would there be in a place like this? he asked.

Depends on the person. Some archmages have armies of apprentices and novices serving them as if they were royalty. Others preferred a dozen close assistants.

At least a dozen that didnt bode well. Quickly, Dallion directed the swarm of shardflies enveloping him in the direction of the building. There were three layers of spells preventing anyone from entering, but those werent of any consequence. Dallion could easily see how to untangle and disrupt them, even without relying on brute force. Not that the shardflies wouldnt have enjoyed slicing through everything in sight.

What should I be worried about? Dallion asked, while splitting through the air.

The battlemage would have some artifacts, thats for certain. Ive no idea what hes come across, but there might be a lot of rather nasty devices in the building. Valerian had a tendency to snatch things he fancied. Id say imagine the fight against the apprentice, but not in your favor.

You keep saying that. Id think you have a low opinion of me.

Youre a novice drunk on divine magic. Need I say more?

The point was well made. Even in his current high, Dallion knew he wasn't indestructible. He had learned a few new tricks, but he could just as easily lose them once the effects of the Moonstone wore off.

I guess I'll use my empathy to find his weakness.

I might not be versed in the finer points of the trait in question, but from what I've seen in your realm, I could say that it doesn't work like that. Nil let out a sigh.

Maybe not, but it doesn't cost me anything to try.

Extending his magic through three dozen of shardflies, Dallion directed them to cut through the bonds of the spells cast on the approaching rooftop. The process was similar to bomb defusal, according to the movies Dallion had seen on Earth, only a lot simpler. No longer connected, many of the magic symbols quickly faded away. Others remained active in isolation, posing no danger whatsoever. Dispelling the few symbols of significance proved somewhat more difficult. The principle was similar: one merely had to sever the thread between key points in order to release the magic. The catch was that in order to do so, the amount of magic used had to exceed the one invested in the spell manyfold. Then again, having access to an infinite supply of magic tended to make things go a lot smoother.

Two layers fizzled away, releasing their magic in a large puff of purple smoke. The next one provided marginal resistance, causing a few crackles here and there, but it too was swiftly rendered inert. The final one proved the easiest of all, so Dallion combined its removal with the systemic slicing up of the rooftop itself. The archmage was going to be mad that his building had been rendered roofless, but that was a problem for later.

Ready, everyone, Dallion said, as chunks of stone floated out of the way, revealing the archmage's room.

Dozens of magical sources emerged, each more different from the last. Some were even surrounded in an otherworldly shiver, marking the items as obviously from elsewhere. Learning more about them was tempting, especially since Dallion now had the ability to easily figure out how they worked. Unfortunately, there were bigger concerns. A single body lay on the floor. It belonged to a man dressed in clothes that would put an archduke's wardrobe to shame. Jewelry, artifacts, and magic items were all over him like decorations on a Christmas tree. Yet they had done little to prevent the lethal blow that had pierced the man's stomach.

The archmage, Dallion thought. He'd only seen the man in a memory fragment, but recognized the features. The hairstyle and facial hair had changed, but in all other aspects, the facial features remained identical.

A few steps away, trembling in the corner of the room, was someone else—the only living entity in the entire complex. The person's clothes showed signs of intense fighting, but he himself appeared completely unharmed. That didn't prevent him from gripping a weapon with both hands.

Raven? Dallion descended.

The boy didn't immediately react. Remnants of fear emanated from him, filling the room with a low-pitched ring. As the seconds passed, the sound got less and less until it was almost not there.

Careful, Nill warned. Hes not what you

I know exactly what he is, Dallion said calmly. He could see the magic glow within the boy the same that was glowing from within him. Argus was never here. You consumed the Moonstone.

It wasnt supposed to happen, Raven said in a trembling voice. He appeared more terrified of the fact that he had wasted the item than actually killing the archmage.

Of course, Dallion thought. Only a child would think of such a thing. Even with surprise and everything else to his advantage, he wouldnt be able to kill an archmage, even one as weak as this one.

I guess thats what you needed the magic draining sword for. Dallion glanced at the weapon.

He was supposed to just die, Raven went on.

There was no trace of the calm and collected noble Dallion had gone to magic lessons with. Before him was a scared boy who had seen his entire world shatter. Even so, he remained his enemy. The moment Dallion took a step forward, Raven combat split, jumping to his feet in a variety of fashions. In a few instances, he even attacked, only to be countered by Dallions own combat splitting.

You werent able to use that before, Dallion said, cautiously moving about the room with his instances. The Moonstone helps, doesnt it? All that power, no more limits Im surprised that Argus let you use it.

It happened by accident! Raven snapped. He was supposed to be here. All of them were! Its their fault that they deserted me.

Dallion considered using his empathy trait to see Ravens memory. So far, hed only seen fragments of someones distant past. Being able to see events that had passed moments ago would be difficult, if not impossible.

Any theories about this, Nil? He asked.

Plenty of theories, the echo replied. Im sure you have a few of your own.

Looks like they left you once you did your job, Dallion ventured a guess. More importantly, he took advantage of the situation to use his music skills. A battle-hardened mage would be on guard against such an attack; a boy in a confused state was more likely to ignore such interference, especially if subtly done. They cut the strings, leaving all their puppets to suffer the consequences.

Youve no idea what youre talking about. Raven gritted his teeth.

Let me guess. Dallion pushed on, putting fear, anger, and sadness into his words. The mage said that youre special. He gave you a task that only you as a child of a prosperous noble could achieve. Everyone was going to be in your debt, right? Theyd honor you as a hero once it was over and youd be remembered for generations.

I will be remembered!

Well, in that case, where is he? Dallion mockingly looked about with several of his instances. Ill tell you. Hidden safely away, leaving his minions to take the fall for

Argus works for me! Raven shouted, all of his instances vanishing. You think Im some pawn? He is the pawn! He begged my parents to become part of this, just like all the rest!

This was new. Dallion paused, but maintained his own instances active.

You think my father went through all that trouble to get rid of the Academy? The Academy has been done for ages ago! The archmage is a joke that considers bribes a hobby and hasnt cast an adequate spell in years. This place is just a hindrance on the way to victory!

Someone must have taught him those phrases, Dallion thought.

And you think a single archduke can take down the emperor? Dallion used his music skills to push Raven just a bit more.

You think my fathers just another archduke? Arrogance mixed with rage within the boy. One of the old emperors gave us this piece of land as a token, to ensure that we dont attack them. The empire has never been as strong as it pretended. Now they are outright weak, and its time for us to take what is rightfully ours!

Crap! Youre part of the alliance against the empire, arent you? Dallion drew his harpsisword. Meanwhile, more of the shardflies flying in the area flocked onto him, reinforcing his living armor.

Im not part of it. Im one of those that lead it. Now that Ive shown everyone that I can kill the Academys archmage, theyll have no choice but to give me the crown! The empire fell today! You just havent figured it out yet!

The boy dashed forward, the magic draining dagger at the ready.

Immediately, Dallion used his shardflies to cast dozens of magic barriers. He had vastly miscalculated the situation.

Chapter 735: An Echo's Brother

It was said that the only thing worse than a skilled opponent was an unstable one. Facing the erratic combat style of Raven, he could partially agree. The boy was a lot more skilled than he imagined. The Moonstone he had absorbed made his speed match that of Dallions. Significantly inferior in the combat splitting department, the boy made up for it through spell knowledge. Aether shards and bolts of magic flew all over the place, often neutralized by the rooms own defenses. As any snob, the archmage had made sure to cast protective spells on his valued items while alive.

Ruby, get out of here! Dallion ordered, while casting a series of spells of his own. Hundreds of emerald shardflies had died since the start of the fight, the overall amount negligible compared to what was in store.

I can fight, the creature countered, somewhat annoyed.

Not against a Moonstone.

Running along the walls, Raven performed a multi-attack, attempting to strike Dallion with the tip of his blade. Several instances were almost skewered, Dallion quickly causing them to fade away before the magic draining dagger could make contact.

I would advise not using any further music skills on him, Nil said. You'll only irritate him more.

How much more?! Dallion hisses, directing the shardflies near his right hand to form a blade with which he slashed at Raven.

The attack caught the boy by surprise, digging into his leg. Before the wound could get deep, Raven twisted around, slicing the blade with his weapon.

Chunks of dead shardflies fell to the ground, completely drained of magic.

That has to be an echo, Dallion thought. There's no way he's that good.

The children of nobles learn combat from a very early age, Nil explained. His style is well practiced, if lacking a bit of polish.

Dallion didn't agree. This wasn't the style of a sheltered awakened. Whoever was controlling Raven had experienced practical combat. It wasn't as skilled or efficient as the echo who had controlled Phoel; this type of opponent was something else, almost as if Dallion was facing a mercenary, or another hunter.

Who are you? he asked, performing a double slash spin, followed by a piercing plunge.

I'm Dreud, the boy replied, his face twisting in a creepy smile.

Raven wouldn't fight like that.

Is that so, hunter scum? The boy pulled back.

Simultaneously, both sides took advantage of the pause to cast a new volley of spells. Barriers and combat magic erupted yet again, destroying large chunks of the floor between them. This time the defensive spells weren't able to prevent the devastation from occurring.

Lux, peek in his realm, Dallion ordered.

On my way, boss! the firebird replied from Dallion's realm.

I can say for certain that Argus isn't in there, Nil noted. His spells are too amateurish.

Tell me something I don't know. Dallion filled the space between the two with magic barriers, then had the shardflies draw magic symbols of heat on them, doubling the temperature on Raven's side of the room. When it came down to it, both were fighting against time. There was no telling whose Moon magic would end first, but it wouldn't be too far apart from the other.

The bladebow appeared in the sky above. The kaleidovristo pointed in the direction of Raven, revealing the inhabitants of his realm.

There's just one, boss! Lux chirped.

I knew it, Dallion whispered, vindicated. You're just an echo, controlling him! he shouted. So, how does it feel to hide behind a child high on magic?

Much better than you'd ever know! Came the response. He must feel honored being a minor part of history. Both of you should! From today, a new dawn is here the age of the Seventh Moon!

Nil, is it possible for an echo to go crazy?

It seems to be. The old echo seemed just as puzzled.

You think the Moonstone caused this?

Impossible. If that were the case, I would have been affected as well. No. if anything, it has to do with the echo itself. It doesn't seem to be a symbiotic echo.

It has to be. What else can puppet a person?

Not many things. There is one other possibility, however. The person might have voluntarily relinquished control to the echo.

Dallion was just about to ask what sort of person would do that, when he remembered: Raven was a child. No amount of training and echoes could change that. He had skill, knowledge, and probably considerable experience in the realms, yet he remained a scared little boy who had never faced hardship alone. In such circumstances, it was natural he'd hide and put all his trust in the only person left.

Are you the Star? Dallion asked.

The Star? The boy laughed. A shadow to scare the weak and mess up the mind of the stupid. The Star didn't achieve this! I did! Me!

All magic barriers shattered simultaneously as purple light flooded the room. The air heated up, changing the room into an oven, but thanks to the Moonstone's power, Dallion was able to ignore the effects. A dozen instances of Raven charged at him, striking at his collarbone. An upward part prevented the attack from reaching its target, although in the process Dallion had to retreat several steps back.

A dozen shardflies flew off Dallion's living armor. Taking advantage of them, Dallion cast a spell sending twenty aether projectiles right into the child's torso. The spell was strong enough to defeat most beasts and awakened, but in the case of Raven, they merely added some more holes to his clothes.

You're right, Nil. Dallion jumped further back. He is an amateur.

You can harm me. Raven laughed. Even if you're good enough, you'll only hurt him.

Won't that get you in trouble with his parents? Dallion used his music skills to make his opponent even more overconfident.

Why would it? They're my parents as well?

Somehow, I should have guessed. Dallion tried to create the impression of being calm. Only someone more arrogant than him would do away with all the assisting echoes.

None of them were willing to pay the price for victory. Argus kept going on about the value of the Moonstone. As if that matters in the grand scheme of things. When the new age begins, well have more magic than he could imagine.

Wont that be counterproductive? If others have magic, defeating them will be more difficult.

You still dont get it. Ravens smile widened. When the Tamin empire falls, there wont be anyone left to fight. The Order wont go against a favored of Galatea. The Alliance of Stone and Steel might be a bother, but others are taking care of that. Weve already won! The boy laughed maniacally. Ive won!

Come on, Dallion cursed internally. As talkative as the person controlling Raven was, he was still giving him mere crumbs. One might almost consider that a ploy if it wasnt the increasing sense of instability emanating from the boy. Dallion could feel two sets of motions, constantly intermingling like fruit and water in a blender.

Attempting to peek into Ravens memory didnt help, either. The Moonstone probably prevented that from happening.

He wont tell you, Nil said. The only way forward is to defeat him before your boost is gone.

Do you know who he is?

Of course, I know who he is. There isnt a noble in the empire who doesnt know who he is, but I still cant tell you. The only thing I can say is that youre lucky hes not here in person. His echo must have somehow been affected, bringing it to this pitiful state.

If that was pitiful, Dallion definitely didnt want to see the real deal. Something told him that should he survive this encounter, he very well might. The person behind the echo didnt sound like someone whod leave things unfinished. If he was willing to sacrifice his brother without a shred of remorse, one could only imagine what hed do to people who really annoyed him.

How about we make a bet? Dallion suggested. If I win, youll tell me

The sentence remained unfinished, for at that moment Raven charged forward again. Casting a quick spell with his left hand, he sent nine orbs of fire in Dallions direction.

Unlike before, Dallion recognized the spellit had been available in the library section of the Learning Hall. Each orb was a concentrated fireball, guided by a simple levitation spell. There were a few symbols that Dallion hadnt learned at the time, though now he could recreate easily.

Resorting to novice spells? he mocked, bursting into instances.

With the amount of magic put into the spell, even such simple orbs were capable of devastating damage. Several of them drilled through a few of Dallions instances, creating holes in the wall behind. In the other cases, Dallion was able to combine his athletic and guard skills to evade. Twice he almost completed a guard sequence, but Raven attacked before Dallion could gain his bonus.

Why didnt you let your brother flee? Dallion asked, casting Cheskas chain spell. There was enough time. The archmage was already dead.

He wasn't dead before you got here. And even if he were, what's the point? My brother was the key to the Academy, nothing more.

He seemed a bit more than that.

Because he thought he was? He's nothing. Even with magic, he couldn't do a tenth of what he was supposed to. He'll never be able to increase his awakened level, remaining a pitiful mage till the day he dies. He'll never become a noble.

And you have? Dallion sent out shardflies all over the room. A few attacked Raven with their razor wings, but for the most part they merely landed on the walls, creating a second layer on top.

Indeed. I have real power. No one gave it to me. Not my parents, not Argus, least of all my useless brother.

Enough power to take on the emperor?

The shardflies were everywhere. Dallion had set the trap. Now all he had to do was to extend his magic to them at the right time. Raven had proven he was strong enough to counter any attack or spell, but could he be able to react to a hundred spikes flying towards him from all directions?

Lux, be ready, Dallion thought. If he tries to fly out, hit him.

Yes, boss! the firebird cheerfully replied.

The emperor is a hollow shell. No one has seen him in over a decade. Even the orders don't come from him anymore. The inner court is playing games they cannot control.

Nil?

Pay no attention, dear boy. The emperor rarely makes appearances. None of them have.

Then how can you be sure that he's still in charge?

Because it doesn't matter. Whoever's giving the orders has full control over the guardians of the imperial capital. There's no going against that.

A flutter of shardflies flew off Dallion, filling the space between him and the nearest wall.

Got you! Dallion extended his magic.

Purple threads spread along the walls, like electric currents. Within moments, they had connected every shardfly in sight. Magic symbols formed, followed by an explosion of spires that shot out from the walls, all aiming at Raven.

Dallion didn't have the heart to kill the boy, so all of them targeted just his arms and legs. In the back of his mind, a voice told Dallion that such mercy was a mistake. If the attack failed, he might not get a similar opportunity.

There was a sound of metal hitting stone. The magic draining dagger had fallen to the ground along with the hand still holding it.

Get it! Dallion extended his right hand, sending a torrent of shardflies in the direction. Unfortunately, he was too late. A green sphere had appeared around Raven, regenerating all wounds and missing limbs. The boy squeezed through

the spikes, grabbing his weapon. One strike and all nearby shardflies shattered to dust. One more and the spikes were no more, crumbling to dust.

Damn it! Dallion cursed.

It had been a perfect plan, and it had failed.

Chapter 736: Raven's Realm

Ordering the shardflies off, Dallion drew his harpsisword.

Harp, will you survive the magic drainer? he asked, evading Ravens attacks through extreme combat splitting.

It cant affect items, the nymph guardian replied.

That was all Dallion needed to know. Tapping the blade of his harpsisword, he sliced through a spoke of stone, parrying Ravens attack. The boy flinched, surprised for a moment, but then quickly twisted his body in a way that even someone double jointed would have difficulty with. The action made it apparent that the person Dallion was fighting was a true noble.

Meanwhile, the emerald shardflies continued with their attempts to harm the boy. No longer receiving instructions, they had become a hindrance for both sides. While their attacks were deadly and numerous, the speed was so slow that evading them presented no issue. Dallion could easily see the wind slashes like waves of magic floating through the aireasy to evade, and even easier to slice out of existence. Then again, this could also be an opportunity.

Once again, both opponents had the same idea, taking advantage of the shardflies numerous, yet chaotic, attacks to complete a guard skill sequence. Blades clashed one final time, before each performed their own series of evasions. Time slowed down.

Got you! Dallion thought.

No sooner had he done so, than Raven leaped right at him, no slower than before.

Crap! Dallion instinctively cast a protective barrier spell with his left hand.

Nil, how come hes not affected? He asked, moving back while casting the spell on repeat.

Because he completed his sequence at the same time, the old echo replied. A quite splendid execution on both your parts, I must say.

Aether barriers shattered like glass as the boy kept on pushing forward. Left with nowhere to retreat, Dallion resorted to sword fighting again. He could sense Harp occasionally guiding his attacks, though that only provided a moderate advantage. Ravens style was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was both precise and fluid, as if a nymph or fury was controlling the blade.

For several seconds, blades swished through the air, barely touching one another, then engaged in dozens of strikes as if two woodpeckers were attempting to peck out each others beaks. Sparks poured out of the harpsisword, only to be quickly swallowed by the magic draining blade.

Harp, can you guide my hand? Dallion asked.

Im doing it, the guardian replied, partially confused.

Dallion would have liked to explain exactly what he had in mind, but there was no time. His mind was working on overdrive, calculating potential attacks and other approaches. In this short amount of time, Dallion had already seen that his chances of victory were slim, and decreasing by the second. Even without the aid of Argus, Raven was a better mage than him, while his brother vastly superior when it came to combat. The greatest advantage Dallion had was the lack of coordination between the boy and his echo. While the older brother had taken control, he was still getting used to the role of puppeteer. The moment he went through that hurdle, he could well become invincible.

Lux, get down here and do a blinding flash! Dallion ordered.

I know what youre thinking. Nil raised the alarm. It wont work. You have a better chance of defeating him here.

Forgive me if I dont trust you, Nil. Dallion gritted his teeth.

There will be two of them! Not to mention that magic will

Before the echo could finish, the bladebow that was Lux emerged between him and Raven. The firebird had moved so fast that it appeared hed teleported there without warning.

Dallion closed his eyes. He felt the flash that followed even through his eyelids. His entire body plunged forward. The hand holding the harpsichord extended forward based on his memory of where Raven had been. There was no contact. Even taken by surprise, his opponent was unwilling to let himself be defeated. It was at that point that Harp did what she had been asked.

The harpsisword lead Dallions head forward, then, when it could do so, no more tugged him gently to the left. So it continued for a full second until it came into contact with somethingsomething warm.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

REALM INVASION

A red rectangle popped up, becoming visible despite Dallions eyes still being closed. That was reassuring. It meant his plan had worked.

Lux, Nox! Dallion said, opening his eyes.

Familiars and gear alike appeared, as he prepared himself for battle. This was a tremendous gable on his side. Even with Raven being no more than level twenty, he was bound to have impressive skill and trait values. Furthermore, there was always the chance that the magic draining weapon would be linked to his domain.

Dallion split into a dozen instances and looked around. He was in a large training room, similar to a closed arena. Statues and portraits covered the walls, depicting the boy in various stages of his life. In some, he was no more than five years old, holding a large sun gold saber in a battle pose. The others were of similar nature, depicting the boy in older stages of life. At one point, the pictures drastically changed. Gone were the weapons, replaced by spell circles surrounding Ravens hands.

He must have had a fun childhood, Dallion whispered.

Most nobles go through the same, Nil said. Only those completely incompetent get pampered out of pity.

Thats not what Ive seen.

You havent seen as much about nobles as you think.

After spending a few more seconds examining the place, Dallion made his way to the massive steel doors that marked the only way out of the chamber. Since Ravens level was so low, his realm remained in the dungeon-tunnel state. One could assume there would be twenty rooms connected via one long corridor, unless the boy was extremely creative. Normally, the rooms would be filled with dozens of strong echoes, there to protect him from any potential invasion. However, Lux had already mentioned that a single echo was present an echo lacking magic.

In different circumstances, fighting against a mage and a noble would have been strongly inadvisable. The combination was enough to cause towns to surrender. Dallion wasnt alone, though. He had many friends supporting him, several of which were capable of spellcasting as well.

No sound could be heard beyond the double door. Nonetheless, Dallion tapped the blade of his harpsisword and gently pierced through it. Three instances sliced the door the same way someone would open a can of beans. Seven more stood a respectable distance away.

TERMINAL WOUND

Your health has been decreased by 100%

A red rectangle emerged as what was left of the door exploded, destroying all three of Dallions instances.

Should have guessed, Dallion hissed, choosing one of the remaining ones to become reality. Raven was waiting for him and was prepared.

As I tried to tell you earlier, theres two of them and you dont have a lot of maneuverable space, Nil said. You were better off fighting in the real world.

That could be argued. Despite the tactical disadvantage, all that Dallion had to do was eliminate the echo. Without anyone to control him, Raven would be rendered harmless or go on a wild spree until the Moonstone effects fizzled off. Either way, Dallion would no longer be targeted.

Nox, youre up buddy, Dallion said.

Without needing instructions, the crackling divided into two, going to the side of both doors. It was a pleasure watching him slice the hinges with his claws, causing the thick metal pieces to hit the floor with a slam. Similar to before, a ray of scorching flame flew in from the corridor, hitting the wall behind.

That wasnt a spell Dallion was familiar with. Four of his instances sprinted into the corridor in a scouting attempt. Two of them even resorted to wall running. Alas, their fate was the same. Four rays of flame hit them well before they could make anything out.

Are novices taught illusion? Dallion asked from the safety of the hall.

Not usually, but I think you should ignore the standard curriculum. Nil grunted. While there are limits to what a novice could achieve, I'm sure that Argus taught him everything he could get away with.

It's a good thing he isn't here, then. Dallion had more of his instances rush into the corridor.

One after the other, they attempted to reach the far end, like enemy NPCs in an action side-scroller. Most of them got vaporized within seconds, but slowly the mass managed to find a pattern, causing them to inch closer and closer.

Seeing his success, Dallion increased the pressure. Hundreds of instances poured in, this time they were also casting spells of their own. In one case, Dallion even went so far as to do a spark-infused point attack down the corridor. The echo of Raven's brother must have anticipated that, for the strike was met with an equivalent point attack, canceling it out.

You know you can't win. Dallion resorted to his music skills. I don't need the Moonstones' powers to keep this up. I can go about it all day.

I don't need a Moonstone, either! a deep voice shouted back.

The anger Dallion had imbued his words had had an effect. Now he got to hear the real voice of his adversary for the very first time. Based on its properties, he could assume it belonged to someone in their late twenties, or mid-thirties, strongly suggesting that the persona and Raven were only half-brothers. That would also explain why the boy was considered expendable. The enemy noble shared no love for his brother. On the contrary, it was very likely he despised him.

It was always messy when it came to nobles. They did a good job presenting themselves as the upper crust of society—something unreachable that ordinary people aspired to be. The outfits, the buildings, the glamor that accompanied them had the single purpose of maintaining that image. Beneath it, they were just as human and petty as everyone else, more so in certain regards. That was why losing face was considered the greatest fore than an insult. When it came to intrigue and politics, it was the same as a wound on their image.

One could speculate that Raven had to be the misfit of the family. Not a direct heir and brother to one who'd already passed through the fifth awakening gate. He would have probably had a spoilt and pleasant life if he hadn't ended up with the magic trait. That change had thrust him into the game of politics faster than a poison arrow. Many had seen him as a useful pawn, Raven probably viewed himself as a player, while his brother regarded him as a threat.

Nil, is the house of Dreud split? Dallion asked.

It's a well-known fact that they are one of the most united households within the empire, the echo said. That is one of the reasons they've successfully kept their province all this time. Of course, there's talk that even the strongest house might not survive having two strong heirs.

Ha! I knew it!

Which is why there's a lot of talk who the Dreud heir would marry. The old echo continued. Being the prodigy he is, it's almost inevitable that any offspring will

inherit those qualities and potentially even outshine their father at some future point.

Crap! Dallion thought. Fighting Raven was difficult enough. If his brother was considered being the family prodigy, even his echo would prove a challenge.

The waves of instances kept pushing on, now reaching the middle of the corridor. Raven was doing his best to keep them at bay, but it was obvious they were overwhelming him. It wouldn't be long before Dallion made it to the illusion barrier and peeked beyond.

Be careful, the armadil shield said.

Why? What's wrong? Dallion asked.

If the echo can easily negate point attacks, why hasn't he used a single echo?

Dallion thought about it. There were only two reasons he could think of. The Dreud family probably knew everything there was to know about Dallion, especially as Adzorg was helping them. They were aware of his forced combat splitting ability. There was a chance that the echo of Ravens brother was deliberately not resorting to that so as not to end up in a compromising state. However, it was the other possibility that Dallion was concerned with. What if his opponent was just as skilled, if not better? If so, that would suggest he could have easily thrown out Dallion from Ravens domain, but didn't want to. What if his entire aim wasn't to kill Dallion, but to have Dallion kill or cripple his brother? As messed up as that seemed, it was precisely something a noble would do.

Chapter 737: Out of Moonstone

Three echoes of Dallion mixed with his instances, running down the corridor. All three of them did a point attack, and all three had the attacks deflected back at them. Whatever technique the enemy echo was using, it was superior to anything Dallion had seen. No question about it. If it came to a standard fight, he'd lose.

What happens if an echo kills the owner of its domain? Dallion asked.

Nothing, the old echo said. An echo can't destroy the realm it's part of. If it's an invading echo, it can take control of the realm, but even then, there's nothing it could do to the owner. Well, nothing other than change his way of thinking.

There was no way the enemy echo was an invader. Dallion would have seen some indication if that were the case.

What about limiting skills? He pressed on. Or delevelling?

Only the Order can do that.

They can switch sides too.

Dallion had seen clerics work for the Mirror Pool. Would it be a stretch to think they would ally themselves with someone capable of destroying the empire? From what he knew, there were three great powers in the world: the Tamin Empire, the Order of the Seven Moons, and the mage Academy. It would be quite convenient if two of those happened to spontaneously implode, leaving the order to mop up things, ushering in a new age of peace and prosperity throughout the world. It

sounded plausible, if only it hadn't been for the echoes rantings. The Age of the Seventh Moon that's what he had said. It was oddly specific, especially uttered by someone who wasn't a mage.

Leave my realm! Raven shouted. My fight isn't with you. Let me leave and you won't be harmed.

Will your brother allow that? Dallion asked.

There was no answer.

You know he'll kill both of us. He pretty much said so. Dallion filled his words with sadness and fear. He considers you more of a threat than me. I'm just a hunter, but you're the one who can take his place as your father's heir.

As he spoke, Dallion started casting a spell one rather intricate that he had learned from Harp.

I never wanted to be heir! Raven shouted. Dallion's magic skills had had an effect, just not the one he'd hoped for. Everything I do is in support of my brother! He's the true heir, stronger than I'll ever be.

What were you saying about influencing the thoughts of the realm owner, Nil?

Dallion sped up his casting.

The boy was already gone. There was no telling when Raven had the echo added to his realm, but it had done a terrifying job.

Sorry I have to do this, kid, Dallion thought, then cast the water portal spell.

Water burst into the chamber, filling it within seconds. Dallion's instances faded away as he prepared for an underwater fight. This brought him back to the time Katka had tried to kill him. At the time, they were fighting for the remnants of a loud citadel. If only he'd had magic at the time, he'd have been able to memorize the spells she used. Instead, he had to make do with makeshift substitutes. An aether sphere surrounded him, providing protection from water and attacks alike. Following it, Dallion cast a series of attack spells, sending projectiles down the tunnel as it was being flooded with water. And just to make things more uncomfortable for his enemies, Dallion bent down, extending his magic threads through the protective sphere to create a heat symbol on the floor.

Going a bit overboard, aren't you, dear boy? Nil asked.

Whatever gives me an advantage. Dallion floated away from the heat source.

New sets of his instances moved to the entrance of the tunnel in an attempt to keep up the pressure. Many of them even ended their protective spell and rushed in. Before any could get even ten steps in, the walls and ceiling of the corridors disappeared.

Reality instantly shifted. Dallion was no longer in an underground dungeon, but on top of a large tower. Sky and stars were all around him, along with six of the seven Moons.

No longer constrained by the walls, the water slammed onto the stone floor, flowing off the sides of the tower.

What the heck?! Dallion asked, looking around. Judging by the vast emptiness that surrounded the tower, it was going to take years before the area was flooded.

Nice try, someone laughed.

A hundred feet away, standing on the opposite side of the towers terrace, were two figures. Dallion instantly recognized the childlike features of Raven. He seemed beyond exhausted, breathing heavily, hands ready to cast a spell at a moments notice. A large chameleon was sitting on his shoulders, wrapped around him like a giant collar.

Thats why you finish off threats, especially magic ones, Nil said with a sigh. They have a nasty tendency of biting you in the ass later on.

It wasnt the creature that had Dallion worried, but the person behind Raven, or rather the echo. Never before had Dallion seen the boys older brother, but it was obvious he had all the hallmarks of a noble. Wearing a vest of dragon scales over a shirt of sapphire threads, the man rose over two heads above his brother. He seemed rather young, possibly a few years younger than Dallion himself, with a broad frame and flawless pale skin. The knee-length boots he was wearing were entirely made of sea iron, complementing his jade-black trousers.

Seeing Dallion, the echo smirked.

Catchy spell, Raven continued. Ill have to remember it for later.

Youre not the one fighting, Dallion said. Youre barely standing.

No! Clusters of spite and shame appeared throughout the boys body. Despite being in no condition to fight, he was a lot more frightened of disappointing his brother than anything else. Clearly, he was ready to fight to the death, or even to the loss of his realm.

Nil, can an echo be crazy? Dallion asked.

Usually, yes, but thats not the case here. Ravens doing this. His unstable state of mind, combined with the power of the Moonstone, has allowed him influence the realm and everything in it. And since the echo is part of the realm Lets say that certain buried thoughts might have leaked through.

A likely excuse. Dallion wasnt in the least convinced. While it was true that acting like a maniac was a certain way to get shunned, as long as a noble had the strength to back it up, everything was possible. If mage Argus was indeed taking his orders from this person, he had to be incredibly strong. Just how strong, Dallion intended to find out.

You think you can defeat the emperor? Dallion shouted, looking at the echo.

I already have. The echo crosses its arms in an arrogant fashion.

So, youve said. From my point of view, hes still standing. And given that Archduke Dreud is still in control of his province, Id say youre nothing but another puppet.

It wasnt much of a provocation, but it sparked a response. Unfortunately, to Dallion, it also sparked two.

The noble summoned a saber, but before he could do anything, Raven had cast a dozen of spells. Rings of aether blades and spears emerged in the air. These were no novice spells, they were something a battlemage would use.

Nox, delay him! Dallion shouted as he started casting a new spell.

The crackling divided into a litter of cubs, each of which dashed at Raven. Simultaneously, Lux lifted Dallion upwards.

Aether blades filled the air, flying towards Dallion like homing missiles. Despite the firebirds attempts at evasion, they refused to let up. If Dallion had his hands free, he could scatter them with a single line attack, but doing so would cause his current spell to fizzle.

Spears struck the ground, focusing on the approaching cracklings. Apparently, the boy wasn't stupid, taking everything into account. Nox was able to evade most thanks to his current level, but the moment he got remotely close, Ravens echo did a casual line attack.

MINOR FAMILIAR WOUND

NOXs health has been decreased by 20%

Three red rectangles stacked up, as the line of destruction sliced through crackling cubs. A large chunk of the tower slid off, falling into the abyss below.

Nox, get out of here! Dallion ordered just as he finished his spell.

Casting a death ray at a child wasn't something to be proud of, but it was better than being dead.

Dozens of aether barriers emerged in front of Dallion in an attempt to delay the inevitable. The ray effortlessly shattered them, striking the boys shoulder.

FATAL HIT

Dealt damage has been increased by 500%

With a cry, Raven fell on his knees. His spells had prevented him from losing outright, but even so he had suffered significant damage.

Thank the Moons I missed, Dallion whispered.

You didn't, Nil said. The chameleon shifted reality just enough to avoid a fatal hit.

Why not completely?

The creature has its limits, too. Besides, its only the boy that was hit, not the chameleon.

Summoning his harpsisword, Dallion performed a series of point attacks, scattering the pursuing aether blades like twigs. Each attack reduced the pack more and more until, a few seconds later, there were none of them left.

Pitiful, the echo said, standing above Raven. You can't even defeat a mongrel.

I'm not done! The boy insisted. Desperate, he tried to stand back up in an effort to cast a spell, but his hands were shaking.

The effect of the Moonstone had worn off. After receiving that final wound, it was no longer easy to cast spells, even simple ones. Raven made an attempt nonetheless, only to have it fizzle in the air. In response, the echo of his brother slammed him in the back of the head with his boot.

No red rectangles appeared. Knowing what's best for it, the reality chameleon vanished from the boy's shoulders, making an attempt to land on the echo. The action wasn't appreciated, resulting in an instantaneous dagger through the torso. The strike was so fast that Dallion didn't even see it.

Disgusting creature. The echo said, brushing it off. Almost as useless as my brother.

Possibly the only reality chameleon to be captured, Nil grumbled. Such a waste.

I think we should be more concerned about Raven, Dallion thought. Didn't you say that echoes couldn't harm the realm's owner?

You can't call that an attack. Granted, I wouldn't dare try anything of the sort on you.

The old echo seemed remarkably calm regarding the situation. That could only suggest that he had a perfect idea of what had happened, but was unable to share.

A few moments later, Dallion felt the magic within him diminish. The best way to describe it was like a slight draft, taking away the warmth from within him. It wasn't unpleasant, nor sudden, just a gradual decrease, bringing him back to normal. All the powerful spells that Dallion had been able to cast moments ago could no longer be repeated. Try as he might, he couldn't recall the symbols or how to draw them.

Out of juice already? the echo asked. And I was hoping to have some fun.

I still have my attack skills, Dallion said.

Just as trash as the rest of you. The echo laughed. Mania the size of grapefruit appeared within its body. Even if Raven had brought the initial insanity into his realm, the echo was doing a pretty good job of it on its own. I've no idea how the mage lost. His puppet must have been completely useless to end up defeated by you.

Echoes have their limitations. Dallion summoned the armadil shield to his arm. One hit is all it takes.

Is that right? The echo tapped the blade of his saber into his boot. The weapon began to vibrate. I've always wanted the weapon you had. Once I'm done with you, I'll come take it.

Chapter 738: The Name Behind the Mask

What do I call you? Dallion asked, rising further up in the air. Lord Dreud?

I suppose you've earned it by serving this long, the echo mused. Grym.

Grym The name didn't sound familiar, although to be honest, Dallion only had dealings with the southern and central provinces. The north was out of sight, out of bound. It could be said that, with the exception of the imperial capital, an archduke's influence was proportional to the geographical position of their land. The south was viewed as opulent and battle hardened, while the north was calm, poor, and forgotten. No doubt the Star had a lot to do with that.

Dallion split into a dozen instances, half of them launching point and line attacks against the echo. Not once did Grym move from his spot, deflecting them with the ease and amusement of a lion taking on a cubs attack.

Seeing that there would be no result, Dallion chose not to select any of the attacking instances to become reality.

I guess you know who I am, he said, playing for time. In his mind, tens of combat scenarios were taking place, trying to maximize the chances of a potential attack. Only one hit was needed for victory, no matter how insignificant.

I know who you are, Dallion Seene. The echo smirked. Some even thought that after what had happened to your grandfather, you'd be willing to join our side. As if three generations of trash would be worth anything.

Dallion froze. While it was a given that anyone with enough resources and influence could easily find out about his past, the way the echo said it suggested more than a passing familiarity. Had his grandfather had dealings with the Dreuds? Or was he involved in an attempted plot against the emperor? That would explain his punishment. To have someone delevated to single digits was as harsh as having their awakened powers sealed off. If combined with centuries of imprisonment within an item as the former Dherma chief had suggested it would make sense.

What do you know about my grandfather? Dallion lost his cool. Tell me and Ill leave your brothers realm.

Why ask for something you'll do, anyway?

Three daggers split the air, each flying at a different instance. The action was so fast that Dallion didn't even see it. It was the daggers themselves that warned him. That was the reason that top-level awakened rarely resorted to ranged weapons: even the most lethal projectiles fell short of their own skills. The moment an item was let go it was no longer subject to their control, and thus a lot faster and impossible to control.

The attack was met with a line attack, deflecting all three daggers while also continuing towards the echo.

Dallion expected Grym to parry, then go on the offensive. The noble did no such thing. He remained there, completely still, almost amused as the line of destruction approached and then passed through him without doing any damage whatsoever.

Nil. Dallion split into instances and had Lux spread them out. Is that something I don't know?

There was no answer. Focusing with his layer vision, Dallion attacked again. He expected Grym to be too arrogant to do anything but a repeat, and he was right. The attack passed through, slicing off another chunk of the tower, and still not harming the echo in the least.

What the heck? Dallion refused to believe it. Unless his opponent was capable of instant speed, he should have seen something a blur, at the very least. Nobles were without question stronger than him, but not to such an extent. Unless

You're thinking too much. A saber flew Dallion's directions, slicing through one of his echoes.

Almost instantly Grym unsummoned and summoned the weapon, performing another attack.

He's toying with you, Nox said, calm anger in his voice.

The second instance of Dallion deflected the saber, though that didn't make the danger any less real. A minute ago, Dallion was considering going all out against the echo. Now, fear had crept within in making him second-guess any approach he came up with.

Taking a second, Dallion recited the names of the seven Moons again. Fear was the last thing he could afford to give in to. His experience in the wilderness had taught him as much. Still, it was difficult not to be intimidated by someone who could deflect any attack.

The Moons must really have liked you. Grym took a step forward. I've no idea how you defeated anyone with your trash skills. To think that people in the alliance were actually frightened of you. If I'd known you're this piss-poor, I'd have left my brother deal with the situation.

I don't see you attacking?

Why should I? All I need to do is keep you here? It'll take months or even years, but you'll get weaker with time. You're not an echo, so you have hunger, thirst, and stamina to worry about. Meanwhile, I'll just sit here and

Four dozen instances of daggers flew at Dallion. Each three targeted an instance, and most of them hit. Red rectangles were everywhere, reducing Dallion's health by a third on average. Instinctively, Dallion chose an uninjured version of himself to make reality. As he did, he felt someone else attempting to force a different outcome.

So, you can force split, after all, Dallion said to himself.

The attempt was weaker than expected, allowing Dallion to have it his way. After everything he'd witnessed so far, he was relieved, even surprised at the outcome. Given how overwhelming his opponent was, he had expected to lose. Clearly, combat-splitting was an area in which he had the upper hand.

Pitiful save, the echo scoffed. Dallion could see disdain form within him, like a growing mushroom. Let's see how long you'll be able to keep it up.

Grym disappeared. Daggers started flying by the dozens from all directions. These no longer seemed like single attacks. The speed and frequency could hardly be distinguished from magic, or some sort of dagger machine gun.

Combining several of his skills, Dallion twisted and turned in all instances, using all means at his disposal to shield himself from the attacks.

Shield! he ordered.

The armadillo shield extended, covering an entire side of his body. That helped only partially. The torrents of daggers changed direction, always heading to Dallion from his unprotected side. He could, of course, have the companion gear cocoon him, thus providing protection from all sides, but that would come at the price of mobility.

Hes not that strong, the armadil shield said. All you need to do is focus a bit and youll

How do you suggest that? Dallion hissed? While seemingly weak, the attacks didnt give him the time to cast a spell, let alone anything more complicated.

I must start an attack, Dallion thought. Offense was the best defense.

Several of his instances flew down to the top of the tower, but each time they were riddled with daggers before they could get anywhere close. Grym wasnt giving him the option to breathe. The whole toying thing was taking things to the extreme unless it wasnt toying.

A thought passed through Dallions mind. It was highly speculative and circumstantial, but with no other options of success, he decided to bet on it. If he was wrong, hed be instantly ejected back into the real world. If he was right, though, there was every chance he could win this encounter.

Concentrating, Dallion split into a hundred and fifty instances. Ten of them darted down, harpsisword in hand. A hundred and twenty more performed a point attack aiming at what was left of the tower. The vast majority of attacks were deflected, all but those aimed at the edges of the tower and the one that struck Ravens unconscious body.

So, thats your game. Dallion immediately chose another instance to become reality. You really want him dead?

There was no response. The echo didnt appear, but Dallion knew he was listening.

Youre waiting for me to win before you really attack, Dallion continued, moving further away from the tower. As the distance increased, even flying daggers presented no danger. Its obvious you despise me, but you despise him more. As long as the other echoes were intact, they wouldnt let you harm him. How did you convince Raven to use the Moonstone?

Dallion could almost see it in his mind. Mage Argus the real magemust have raged about Dallions decision to waste a Moonstone for something as worthless as getting a momentary boost. Knowing the ego of the man, hed probably made sure everyone in his immediate circle knew about it, and through this, he had presented Grym with a golden opportunity. All that was needed was a gentle whispera request from a prodigious older brother that Raven was desperate to impress. After all, what better glory could there be than killing the archmage on his own without being puppeted by Argus or anyone else? No, not on his own; Gryms ego wouldnt have allowed that. More likely, he had suggested that would be a task that both brothers could do together.

You really did, didnt you? Dallion could sense emanations of anger coming from the towers general direction. That must have really messed up your mind. Divine magic rushing through you and Raven while you were controlling him no wonder you turned into one crazy echo.

A spear flew towards an instance of Dallion. Ten feet before reaching its target, it unfolded like an origami to turn into a spear whip. Hundreds of razor-sharp segments slashed through the air. Slicing scores of instances, yet far from all.

That was always the plan, wasnt it? Your plan. Have Raven kill the archmage, then leave him behind. I didnt have to be the one to find him. Anyone could have. Once the effects of the

Moonstone were gone, you'd have made sure he was in no condition to fight or flee. Then you'd have no rival, and more people would have a reason to rally against the empire. After all, who wouldn't go against a tyrant who's willing to kill a child?

The spear whip slashed through the air again, determined to mop up any remaining instances. Despite it being a copy, Dallion could tell that the real item was fanatically loyal to its owner. Fighting it in real life was going to be a challenge. The last time Dallion had fought against someone with an origami-type weapon, he had barely won. Granted, he was a lot weaker back then, but so was his opponent.

Quite the plan. Dallion kept on adding anger to his words. Even if half my reasoning is right, it's outright ingenious. A pity that you couldn't hold yourself back. You just had to defeat me, didn't you? Having me turn your brother braindead, then be ejected by you from his realm. You'd have proved to the world that you were superior to me, both physically and mentally.

I am superior! the echo shouldered. At this point, though, he was too far up to be reached. The tower itself was no larger than a pin's head. You and your whole family are a bunch of has-beens! Trash that no longer amounts to anything!

The insult stung a bit, but that only proved Dallion's point. The side that resorted to anger was the side that was one step closer to admitting a loss.

Lux, Dallion said. Up for some action?

You can't stay away forever, the echo shouted from the distance. The moment we're back in the real world, this will continue and I will kill you!

And take the harpsisword from me? Dallion laughed. Dream on. Lux, let me go.

Boss? The firebird asked hesitantly.

It's all you and Nox now, Dallion summoned the Nox dagger and tossed it up in the air. Destroy every inch of the tower. Just don't harm Raven. And don't let me hit the ground.

The familiar chirped. Getting what Dallion was asking from him, he leapt onto the Nox dagger, then propelled it towards the top of the tower, faster than a bullet. Impact was almost instantaneous, creating a small crater in cracks on the surface. No sooner had that happened, when Dallion summoned back the Nox dagger and tossed it in the air once more.

Chapter 739: Realm Devastation

Daggers rained on the tower like meteors. Each strike chipped away at the realm, creating crater after crater. The overall size of the top had already shrunk by half. What was left was more scarred than a newbie hunter in a cutting pit.

Dallion watched the destruction as he fell. Every second brought over a dozen strikes, all of them a safe distance away from Raven. The enemy echo made some attempts to limit the destruction, though not very successfully. Neither his skills nor his advanced weapon were able to effectively block the Nox dagger. Had this been the real person with his actual gear, things would have been different. Yet, no matter how impressive, everything seemed. It was nothing but a copy, and copies couldn't be indestructible.

Nothing like a view of destruction, Nil said.

Not funny, Nil, Dallion whispered.

It wasn't meant to be. This might seem like another realm to you, but it's the boys domain. Without the reality chameleon, it will revert to normal once all this is over. He doesn't have Nox to fix things up. Without the effects of the Moonstone and the mage echoes within his realm, it would take a lot to fix things. And that's assuming the empire is even interested.

You just don't give up, do you?

My personal issues aside, do you think that the empire would spare resources when parts of it are crumbling? I wasn't lying when I said that no one can take on the emperor, but that doesn't mean they can't ruin the empire. History is full of powerful awakened. Some of the notable ones were said to be on par with Emperor Tamin I. What happened to them? I'm sure they lived long lives, though never prosperous.

All I have to do is make sure their plan doesn't succeed, then.

Dear boy, their plan has already succeeded. You've limited the damage, no doubt, but the archmage was killed. Other planned events are also taking part throughout the empire. By the time the dust settles here, there will be

A blur darted towards Dallion. He barely noticed it with one of his instances, before the harpsisword appeared on her own accord, guiding his hand to a perfect block.

Blades clashed, thrusting Dallion back, as he found himself unable to compensate for the raw strength.

Always relying on others, the echo of Grym hissed, twisting in the air while performing a series of slash attacks.

Using both his harpsisword and armadil shield to attack, Dallion called Lux back to him. This was something he hadn't foreseen. The acrobatics skills of a high-level awakened allowed for impressive feats, but even they weren't supposed to allow Grym to achieve what he had.

As Lux covered Dallion, granting him the ability of flight, there were no doubts left that the noble had something else up his sleeve. There was one thing that Dallion quickly noticed, though while impressive, the speed of his opponent was nowhere as fast as it had been not too long ago.

Attack and guard markers started appearing, lagging events by seconds. Dallion swung his shield in an attempt to bash Grym, only to receive a stab in the right leg.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

It took mere moments for Dallion's health to get restored, but the combat difference was obvious. The gap wasn't as large as he had feared it would be, though sizable just enough to force him to be on the defensive.

Dallion attempted to pull back, he tried to out combat split his opponent, even cast a spell or two, but no matter what he tried, Grym was one step ahead, mostly thanks to his weapon.

As if walking on air, the echo made a summersault, finishing it off with a vertical chop. The weapon changed from a saber to a massive axe, aiming to split Dallion's head in two. At the very last

moment, Dallion managed to block the attack with his shield. In thirty-three instances he failed to do so, causing them to fade away.

Whats his style? Dallion tried to go on the offensive, doing a three-sixty line attack, followed by a dozen piercing strikes in the direction of the echo. All of them got even close.

Combat acrobatics, Dallion thought. It had to be. The manner in which the echos body bent and twisted reminded him of the way Euryale used to fight.

Extending magic threads through his harpsisword, Dallion attempted to cast a spell or two while fighting, or at the very least, draw a weight symbol on his enemy. That changed the dynamic of the fight. It was unclear whether Grym had fought mages in real life, but blobs of caution appeared within him, making his attacks just a bit slower.

How are you flying? Dallion asked, attacking with his music skills as well. You dont have familiars, so you must be using some artifact?

MAJOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 50%

Gryms blade twisted, turning into a sickle that pierced his lung. Anywhere else this would have ended the fight, if not his life. But these were the awakened realms. All that Dallion felt was a momentary sting before the fight returned to normal.

Not good! He thought. Grym was starting to figure out his pattern.

One of the trinkets you took from your brother? Dallion was moving his right arm so fast that the afterimage created the illusion he had three extra arms striking at the echo. I found those, you know?

That wont work, Harp said. Hes using nymph combat style.

Nymph style? That was a bit exotic, although it clearly was efficient. Dallion had no ready answers against Gryms attacks, having to improvise in the moment like a complete newbie. There was a time when he was naive enough to think that gave him an edge. As he learned through centuries of practice and real-life experiences, learned combat sequences provided a huge advantage that no amount of improvisation could match.

Lux, pull me away! He ordered.

The firebird thrust him backwards at such speed that he felt like puking, and yet Grym was still there, continuing his attack from five feet away.

There was no doubt that he was using some trick to remain loose. Focusing, Dallion tried to use layer vision to find out what was going on. Then he found it: thin, almost invisible threads made of water were wrapped all around him, keeping him and the echo linked. That explained why the echo remained in the air without being able to fly. Thanks to these threads and his acrobatic skills, he was clinking on to the bitter end.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

LEG SEVERED

You're no longer able to make use of your LEFT LEG

Two red rectangles emerged, as Gryms blade changed shape, slicing through his leg. Dallion braced himself for any permanent effects, but thankfully, none emerged. He was lucky.

The echo's successful attack had created a slight opening. Dallion immediately took advantage, aiming to pierce through his left shoulder. The attack was flawless. Alas, before it could strike, crystal scales formed on Gryms shirt, causing the blade to bounce off without creating any damage.

More artefacts?! Dallion cursed. And to think that people were accusing him of relying on others. Even as an echo, the noble had more artifacts than a Mirror Pool treasury.

Taking advantage of the momentary momentum, Dallion did three point attacks in immediate succession. The force ripped part of the water threads, though were quickly deflected by the echo. From this distance, Dallion managed to get a glimpse of the counter. The shocking truth was that the echo never countered, not even once. For that matter, Dallion had never targeted it; what he had been attacking was Gryms afterimage.

One hit, he kept telling himself. I just need one hit.

It seemed so simple. He had defeated far greater foes: dragons, Moon echoes, even the Star himself! There was no way he would be defeated by an ordinary person, and yet that was precisely what was happening.

Leave the realm, dear boy, Nil said. You have no chance of success.

Why the sudden change of heart? Dallion kept on attacking. Lacking a leg didn't seem to impede him terribly, with Lux taking care of all movement. However, exhaustion was starting to kick in. Each strike required a bit more stamina, causing him to need just a bit more air. It wasn't anything he couldn't handle, yet the signs of fatigue were no different than blood in the water. Noticing them as well, Grym kicked it up a notch.

AGGRAVATED WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 15%

ARM SEVERED

You're no longer able to make use of your LEFT ARM

The harpissword fell to the darkness below, along with the rest of his arm.

At this point, it was obvious that he had lost. Nothing prevented the echo from chasing him out of Ravens realm, then continuing the fight in the archmages room.

So close and yet so far away, Dallion said to himself. Did he have a real chance of winning? Maybe if he had kept further away during the bombardment of the tower, Grym wouldnt have managed to attach to him. Maybe if his traits were a bit better, he might have put up a better fight.

Bitterness filled Dallion like purple vines.

Felyg, if you dont want to help me, at least help the kid, Dallion said.

With the fight effectively over, so was Ravens sanity. The moment Dallion was back in the real world, hed be left with the boys husk. He no longer feared continuing a fight in the real world; he was terrified of what his classmate would become. They werent close by any means; they werent even friends, but the hostilities couldnt be said to be entirely Ravens fault. Quite the start difference from the day he had set foot in the Academy. Back then, Dallion would barely have cared. Now he did once more.

Do you really want to save him? Nil asked. He tried to kill you. Several times and on his own accord.

He never had his own accord, Dallion thought. That was the price for being a pawn. Even the important ones were moved about with barely any idea what was going on.

You really wont change a thing.

Probably.

You still dont trust me, do you?

Ill never be able to trust you, Nil. Youre only a guest now.

I understand.

Purple symbols appeared in the air, causing both Dallion and Grym to move away. The interesting thing was that neither of them was the reason for such an occurrence.

A ball of purple light formed, then slowly stretched, changing shape. Soon enough, Nil was there, floating between them as if it were the most normal thing there wasy.

You? Grym asked, brimming with anger. Dont forget your Moon vow!

I remember it very well, thank you. Just as I remember the one you made. None of us can harm the others. Thats why its a good thing that youre actually an echo.

Nils hands moved throughout the air, leaving multiple five-circle spell patterns as they did. Unlike most of the usual spells, these just remain there without coming into effect, as if the echo was stacking them up, slowly building a mega spell.

I still think youre making a big mistake. Nil turned to Dallion. Youve so many options provided, and yet youre determined to pick the worst one. Still, its time you make your own choices. Let this be my final gift to you.

Grym burst into hundreds of instances, all of them striking the mage with his shapeshifting weapon. The saber extended, piercing through the old man. However, nothing changed.

Magic, Nil explained in an almost bored fashion as he continued with his spell. There always are exceptions.

Suddenly, all spell patterns flew towards one another, merging into a sphere. The purple glow changed into green, as the sphere shrunk, getting smaller and smaller, until it was no larger than the head of a pin. Then an explosion followed.

Light burst in all directions, sweeping through everything like a supernova.

REALM RESET

A green rectangle emerged the only thing visible within the incandescent light.

Goodbye, dear boy, the old echo said. Take care of yourself.

Reality shifted.

Chapter 740: Post Archmage Reality

Dallion was back in the spike-filled room. Raven instantly collapsed to the ground. The events that took part in his realm had left him mentally and physically exhausted.

Lux, heal him, Dallion said, as he used a few simple spells to clear as much of the wreckage as possible. It was almost funny how he couldn't do a spell that he had found so simple not too long ago. The spikes coming from the walls and ceiling were going to have to stay until mage reinforcements arrived. At least one would hope they would.

He's gone, Gen said from Dallion's realm.

I know that.

It's not the worst thing. There was no way you could trust him after what he did.

That much was obvious. Dallion fully agreed, and yet he still felt a sort of emptiness inside. It was as if a landmark had gone; even more, it was as the father figure of his realm had upped and left. Dallion wasn't ready to forgive him, not by a long shot, yet he still couldn't find himself capable of hating the old echo.

Will he be alright? he looked at Raven.

Better than me, the armadil shield complained. Hell need some care, but there are enough mages for that.

Are you alright?

Almost got cut in half a few times, but whos counting? You really need to pick up your game for when you meet Grym.

You think well meet?

It's inevitable. He clearly doesn't like you, and after what happened today, he'll want to clear his record. Nobles hold grudges, especially those set on world domination. Trust me, I have personal experience.

No doubt the guardian was right. Even if the Academy kept the matter secret from the public, the whole group of traitors had seen everything that happened through the echoes within their puppets. If Dallion had to guess, they had probably killed off the echoes by now, leaving their puppets stringless and confused. The empire could interrogate the mall they wanted, they could even enter their awakened realms, but they'll only learn pieces of what they wanted to know. Meanwhile, the alliance was free to continue with their activities.

How are things up Dallion began, but stopped himself. All the information about the outside world came from Nil.

As he stood there, Ruby flew onto his shoulder. The insect was soon followed by more shardflies.

You won? Several of them asked.

No, Dallion said. They had run away before the fight began. He glanced at the archmages body, then at Raven. All I did was fight puppets. It was a lie, but it saved a lot of explanations. I think you should leave now. Mages will start showing up and they cant talk to you.

A wave of reluctance filled the room, emanating from the thousands of creatures.

Go up, then south. Ill make sure no one goes after you. There was a bit of hesitation. At the very least, Ill give you a good head start.

There was a fifty-fifty chance that the shardflies believed him. Dallion doubted theyd attack him, but he wasnt fully convinced theyd leave either. That would make for another unpleasant clash in the skies above the archmages complex.

Theres nothing to be gained, he added, using his music skills to make them more agreeable. This isnt your reality, but you can still make some nests in it. The people are simple here. Most of them wont bother you as long as theyre left alone.

Just like us.

Just like you. Dallion forces a smile onto his face. Go. Ill take care of things.

Nothing happened for the next few seconds, then a few shardflies flew out of the room. They were joined by several dozen more, then more. Soon enough, they were flying out in the thousands, heading straight up in the shape of a reversed tunnel. That was at least one less worry that Dallion had. Finding a relatively clean spot on the floor, Dallion sat down. Now that he was experiencing calm for such a long period of pressure, exhaustion hit him like a sledgehammer. It wasnt enough to make him faint, but more than adequate to make him pensive and tired.

Eight minutes passed before the first group of mages arrived on the scenenot the White Eye, but a faction Dallion didnt know anything about. Based on the low numbers and cyan robes, he assumed they were something similar to the battle mages. Each was wearing a large metal bracelet on the left hand, covered in an intricate pattern of magic threads.

No one asked any questions upon seeing the state of the room. They didnt even bother to check the archmage for signs of life. One person went to the unconscious Raven and scoop him up. Two more indicated non-verbally that they wanted Dallion to follow them.

If Nil were still here, hed have told Dallion all about them/ Most of all, hed probably have told him not to mess about and do as ordered.

Do I leave my gear? he asked.

Doesnt matter, a thin mage with massive sideburns said.

And Ruby?

We know all about you pets, and your nature. Dont do anything stupid and youll be fine.

Funny thing to say, considering Dallion was partially responsible for the death of the archduke. Still, he didnt intend to look a gift horse in the mouth.

The mages took him to a new cluster of buildings of the Academy, where he was placed in the most lavish prison cell one could imagine. Back on Earth, Roman emperors would be hard pressed to match the vast marble hall, complete with finely crafted furniture, lifelike statues, not to mention a wall made entirely of windows overlooking a majestic waterfall. Despite all the beauty, Dallion knew that he couldnt leave the room unless he was allowed; and as for size, the place probably occupied the area of a storage closet if magic was removed.

Taking off his gear, Dallion then went to a large wooden bench covered in cushions and lied down. With nothing to do, he tried casting a simple spell, but the moment the magic threads left his fingers they unraveled, making it impossible to draw even a simple symbol.

An anti-magic room? Dallion thought.

He hadnt heard any mention of this. Apparently, mages werent all-powerful as they liked to claim.

Hours passed. Dallion managed to take several naps, leaving his items and Ruby to watch over him. No one disturbed him for the rest of the day. In the evening, someone finally arrived; it was the mage with the sideburns. The emanations of low-level frustration emanating from him told Dallion that the situation had been contained, but the aftermath wasnt good.

Did we win? Dallion asked.

Depends on the we. The man placed the food on the nearest table. He didnt seem to be in the mood to elaborate.

Going to interrogate me?

Novices were taught to be quiet, not make waves, and observe the Academy hierarchy. Yet, Dallion wasnt just a novice, he was also a hunter. Hunters had to be as brazen as possible to get a better price for their skills. In this case, the approach didnt seem to work. The mage looked at him with a cold expression. His lips moved, indicating he had a lot to say.

Youre lucky youre protected, he hissed, then left.

If Dallion didnt have music skills, hed think that the whole thing was staged. Apparently, there was someone looking over him after all. After all that chaos that hed brought, it was difficult to determine why. Whoever it was, though, didnt seem to have absolute authority, for a proper interrogation took place the very next day.

Early in the morning, after Dallion had managed to get an unusually restful night of sleep, he was visited by two high-level mages, who asked him a number of questions in detail, going back to the events of the Nerosal festival.

Dallion had no intention of lying, but still paid special care to what words he used.

Hours passed. There was no break for lunch, or any lunch whatsoever. The mages kept on with their questions, often using magic vortexes to recreate the scene and have Dallion explain everything in detail. Despite the lack of visual detail, it was quite impressive, almost on par with movie VR Dallion had seen on Earth shows.

Adzorg was a particular topic of interest. The mages were very curious regarding any real-life interaction Dallion had had with the man. The library ring echo was completely ignored.

Argus was another favorite, though not Palag. Dallion could only assume that having the fury nearby made it unnecessary to rely on secondhand information.

What about Eleria? one of the mages asked. How often have you seen her?

Eleria? Dallion asked, surprised. Not much. The first time was when I was hired to track down and destroy a dragons shadow. Why? Is she alright?

Its unusual for someone so separated from the Academy proper to recommend an applicant.

I was told that was part of the process. Was she rogued?

And she didnt share any specifics about her research? the other mage interrupted.

Nope, not particularly. That wasnt exactly true. Dallion knew it had to do with creatures, just as he knew that the woman had a phoenix feather with her. Something to do with the local area, from what I remember. He leaned slightly forward. So, is she alive?

The two mages looked at each other, after which one of them vanished.

Thanks for the chart, the other stood up.

Glad to oblige. Pressing his luck, Dallion added a subtle thread of calm into his words. I take it everything is in order outside? No more attacks or shardfly outbreaks.

I would have preferred to have a living chameleon lizard, the mage grumbled. But yes, things are under control.

Anything more?

Dont. The mage darted Dallion a warning glance. Youll be told whats needed.

There didnt seem to be any anger emanating from the man. Could it be that the man was grateful to Dallion? That left the door for some rather interesting question.

Oh, and by the way, good thinking on saving Phoil, the mage said as he went towards the door. Not all of his echoes managed to pop out. We got some interesting info from there.

Why are you telling me that? Good to hear. Dallion nodded. How long will I remain here?

A few more days. The Learning Hall still needs some work.

Was there a second swarm of shardflies? I remember the building was

Its not just the building that needs fixing. The mages tone hardened. Get some rest. Youll know when its safe to go.

Definitely combat mages, Dallion thought.

The emperor must have sent them to resolve the Academy mess before focusing on the larger war. No doubt that would result in substantial territorial losses before things got stable enough for a decisive counterattack. For all Dallion knew, the empire might have lost three provinces in the last few weeks: Dreud, Wetie, and another of the northern ones. If true, the overall territory of the empire had shrunk by half in a frightfully short period of time.

The few more days turned out to be well over a week. Boredom seeped in, infesting everything Dallion was doing. A large part of the time was spent in the awakening realms, talking with his echoes, guardians, and companions. Dallion would have welcomed teaching them skills, but there were no sources of magic he could use to boost them. For better or worse, he felt like being on a long vacation anxious at first, then marginally calm, pleasantly relaxed, and finally bored beyond his skull.

Ruby seemed to share in the annoyance. The shardfly had quickly found that every inch of the room was protected, making drawing impossible. The only thing the creature could do was spar with Dallion in an attempt to grow a bit stronger.

Every day in the morning, a tray of food would magically appear. Getting all the info they needed from him, mages no longer bothered with personal visits. That didnt stop them from monitoring, though. When Dallion voiced a request for a larger bathroom, he was instantly provided with one.

On the fifteenth day since his protective custody, the door finally opened again. Dallion split into a second instance to glance over his shoulder. Of all people, Katka emerged from outside.

Congratulations. She tossed him a green robe. Lets talk.