

Leveling up 741

Chapter 741: Settling Dust

Didn't think they'd send you in person, mage, Dallion said with a hint of sarcasm. After being locked up for what seemed like years, he was glad for any human contact, even her.

They didn't. The woman's fingers danced in the air, completing a spell. Apparently, the limitations preventing Dallion from casting magic in the room didn't apply to her.

A chair appeared out of thin air and gently floated to the floor.

Wash your face, shave up, then put that on. She sat down. And get yourself presentable. Two improvements, at least.

Dallion had no idea what was going on, but decided not to push his luck. Using Rubys assistance, he shaved any and all hairs sprouting on his face, then scrubbed his face with a chunk of water.

Any chance you can tell me what's going on? he asked, passing the water through his hair. How deep are we?

Oh, were in shit alright, Katka replied in a casual manner. The worst kind: not deep enough to mobilize the entire empire, but too much for it to settle on its own. If you had been a bit faster and saved that idiot, things would have been a lot less chaotic.

I take it that the news of his death has spread? Dallion tossed the chunk of water into a nearby bowl of marble.

The bastards had planned it pretty well. In some places, people heard about the news hours before it happened. It was impossible to deny or suppress. As far as everyone is concerned, the tower split with half rebelling against the emperor and the other half supporting him.

Nice and tidy.

Tidy my ass! Such PR would never have passed on Earth. Then again, I suppose I have to be thankful for that.

Done with the washing, Dallion spent a few hours improving every single one of his clothes. With his current skills, it was rather easy. In a quarter of the cases, the item guardians outright surrendered, accepting their improvement. The rest felt an obligation to challenge him to keep his and their skills sharp. It was rather touching, even if Dallion could defeat them without half trying.

What's the real story? he asked when ready.

The Academy split into a lot more pieces. Less than a tenth joined the battle mages against us. About as many joined the Alliance of Stone and Steel. Of what was left, half decided they wanted to become independent.

Just half? Dallion expected the archmage's death to create a lot more turmoil. With the number of giant echoes unleashed, it was inevitable there'd be clashes even before the dust began to settle. Then again, maybe that's what happened? All those who couldn't achieve what they wanted could have taken advantage of the chaos and simply left to work in one notable, noble family or another.

That's the one benefit of having an incompetent boss. Katka let out a scary laugh. Things don't get worse. Of course, those who chose to remain have automatically pledged allegiance to the emperor.

No more doing research in the comfort of the Academy. If requested, we must be ready to go to the front lines and actually fight the enemy.

Were in the army now? Dallion gathered the rest of his gear.

You can say that, only well be fighting more than people.

Whats that supposed to mean? Dallion didnt like the sound of that in the least.

And spoil the surprise? The mage laughed. No way.

Dallion looked at the green robe. Most observers wouldnt notice anything special about it. Even as far as awakened were concerned, it appeared like a cheap robe made out of cotton. Anyone with the magic trait, though, could see the vast number of magic threads woven in with the physical material. The robe was an amplifier, shield, and magic battery all in one. It wasnt by any means as impressive as Katkas own blue robe, though significant in its own right.

I take it I volunteered? Dallion put it on. It felt highly electrified, almost as if he were wearing a piece of static electricity.

No, you graduated. No seal, no more novice nonsense. Welcome to the fun part of being a mage, apprentice.

That was right. By removing his mark, Dallion had become an apprentice. Good to know that even in times of crisis, the Academy stuck to their internal regulations.

I guess I can take more complicated courses now?

I dont think youll have the time. Youve been assigned to me.

You? Dallion blinked. You are my mage? A week ago, Dallion could have welcomed such a change. Now, he was having serious reservations. The way things were going, the only way hed see Eury was on the battlefield as enemies.

There were worse options for the both of us.

That wasnt very encouraging. Uncertain what to think, Dallion followed Katka out of the room. The corridor was as he remembered it, but there was no time to delay. The two of them made their way to a wooden carriage. Unlike most of the ones Dallion had seen near the Learning hall, this one had actual horses in front.

Dont ask, Katka said, not even hiding her disgust. We have the new archmage to thank.

Obviously, the woman had a thing against horses. What was more interesting, though, was her follow up comment.

Theres a new archmage? Things sure move quickly. Dallion made his way into the carriage. A lot of spells had been cast to give it the most presentable appearance, but Dallion could see that beneath the glamor it was pretty common.

What do you expect? We cant afford to show weakness. A decision was made the very same day.

Why didnt anyone tell me that?

Dallion cursed internally. Given the importance of the event, someone might have hinted at least. It wasn't like it would make any difference. Dallion wasn't able to leave his prison to spread the news, even if he wanted to.

Dont worry, were heading there now. You need to get your official reward and learn a thing or two about your new tasks.

Kill people that dont like us? Dallion asked beneath his breath. Thats what wars usually involve.

Katka let out a chuckle, but said nothing. The amount of joy emanating from her was outright scary, almost as if she had been looking forward to this.

With the sound of a whip, the carrier set on its way. From what Dallion remembered, the distance between the archmages complex and the current building wasn't that much. Of course, two weeks ago he had traveled by air.

What happened with the shardflies? he asked.

All gone. Its as if someone told them to run off and hide south. No accusations were made, but both knew Dallion had something to do with it.

Out of habit, or possibly boredom, Dallion glanced at the sky. He didn't expect to see other shardflies apart from Ruby, who remained loyally on his shoulder. Yet, he didn't expect to see crimson clouds floating in the air, either.

And how is the south?

Half the provinces are dead or dying. Katka saved him the trouble. Some are lost, some are fighting. The rest have placed all their troops near the borders, waiting. Everyone except the Order had joined the conflict. Merchants, crafters, awakened guilds all of them are out there.

Everyone had picked a side. There probably wasn't a single nation in the known world that hadn't picked a side in one way or another. The fiercer the war became, the more the alliances would harden, until there was only one.

Suddenly, thunder echoed nearby.

Dallion immediately split into instances, expecting an attack. Instead, he saw sparks of lightning moving throughout the crimson clouds.

Oh, dont worry about that, Katka said dismissively. We got some assistance from a few generous parties. A small contingent of furies to look over our skies.

There werent supposed to be any cloud citadels left

These are new ones. One of Aliens projects. The emperor lent his crimson guard. We just provided the cloud forts and a few thousand mercenaries. Well, technically, a few interest groups loaned them to us, but till the war is over, they are as good as ours.

Crimson furies Dallion whispered. He had seen one during the night auction in Lanitol. When he had inquired at the time, there were suggestions that the Academy was involved in granting unique properties to ordinary furies. Now he saw that the mages had been involved with a lot more. Are they funder furies?

A few. The emperor keeps most of them close to his palace.

More thunder sounded as the carriage proceeded. According to Katka, the cloud forts were doing some sort of tactical trainingsomething she was utterly uninterested in. If one were to take her at her word, she could easily defeat half a dozen forts without breaking a sweat. The image brought back memories of the time she had tried to kill Dallion, Jiroh, and Euryale at the last major cloud citadel. Thinking about it, she had mentioned needing the creatures keeping the citadel in the air. Now Dallion could see why.

There was no trace that the archmage complex had even been damaged. The style was atrocious as before, but every hole, crack, and imperfection had been repaired and covered with a new set of protective spells. The new archmage had even planted a lot of decorative plants, glowing like clusters of purple neon balls all over the place.

A fury with crimson hair and light bronze armor greeted them at the main entrance, courteously opening the doors on both sides of the carriage using air currents.

Welcome, mistress Katka, he said, with a slight bow. The archmage is expecting you.

Mistress? Dallion looked at the mage. Clearly, he wasnt the only one to get a promotion.

Ignore them, the woman said, taking the fury for granted. Theyll get used to the proper etiquette in time.

Heartbreaking, Dallion whispered, all the time walking a few steps behind her.

More furies were placed within the building. Though not of the crimson variety, they seemed more than capable of dealing with any attacker. Of course, the same had been said for the security system of the Academy. No one was supposed to be able to harm anyone in the learning hall, yet no one had taken into account the possibility of silver glass weapons.

Anything I should know before the meeting? Dallion whispered.

Nothing you dont know already. Katka gave him a confused glance. Theres nothing to be worried about. The archmage is a huge fan. Im sure youll have a lot in common.

Harp, is she lying? Dallion asked.

Probably, the harpsisword guardian replied. Shes using a spell to change the emanation of her emotions. She wouldnt do that unless she was lying.

Just great. Right now, Dallion wished he had another chunk of Moonstone. Escape was absolutely impossible. Even if he could somehow outwit the furies, he wouldnt stand a chance against Katka. While it was true that the Moon vow prevented her from killing him, there were many ways she could prevent him from moving without causing physical harm.

A double door made entirely of sky silver opened in front of them. Dallion hadnt had time to check out this section of the complex during his previous visit, but he could see that it was just as luxurious.

Gold and purple light emanated from inside, making it seem as if they were entering the Purple Moons domain.

Hey, relax, Katka said with a carnivorous smile. If we wanted to kill you, we wouldnt have gone through all the trouble to hold an official ceremony. Besides, you still owe me one.

Let me guess, youre calling in that favor.

You got it. If I had ten, Id call them all. Also, its something youll want as well. Trust me.

Dallion knew from experience that whenever someone said trust me, they were lying. The only question was lying about what.

Chapter 742: The New Archmage

Alien, Dallion whispered.

With the exception of Countess Priscord, this was the one person Dallion wanted to stumble upon. So far, theyd only talked twice and, in both cases, the old man had warned Dallion to leave Nerosal or face the consequences. Knowing what he knew now, Dallion could see that he was only alive because the mage hadnt made him his target. Even so, there was no love lost between them.

The mage was a political cockroach, pure and simple. One could only speculate what connections hed established throughout the decades, but they were strong enough to see him fail upwards in instances in which others would have been executed and have their names erased. Alien had been instrumental in helping Valerian oust Adzorg and claim the archmages position. He had also had dealings with the Star, caused the death of a member of the imperial family, and pissed off a Moons familiar to the point it wanted to punish the entire world.

Archmage, the old man said. He was wearing a purple robe made entirely of magic threads. The rest of his clothes seemed pretty common, which was surprising for someone with such a snobbish nature. I take it that Katka has told you what this is about?

Dallion glanced at the woman. His expression said I thought you said he was a fan? The smirk she gave him replied, I lied.

I thought it would be better if it came from you, Katka said. Didnt want to think he wasnt taken seriously.

The new archmage audibly grumbled. Waving a hand, he turned around, making his way to a large throne-like chair. As he did, Dallion noticed something that looked remarkably like an earth game console on the shelf. For it to be here, all the talk and rumors of Adzorg managing to get to other worlds were true.

Youve killed two of the circle. Alien sat down, making a point to keep levitating an inch above the chairs surface. Gassil and now Enroy.

Dallion remained quiet. He couldnt read the mans emotions well enough to tell whether that was a provocation or not.

After recent events, were down to four.

I tried to save mage Enroy, Dallion was quick to add. If you think that I deliberately

Enroy was an idiot, same as Gassil, the archmage interrupted. If they werent from Earth, theyd never have been part of the circle. Theres nothing wrong with a bit of pruning until we become too small to play an active role in things.

Were recruiting you, Katka said impatiently. She didnt seem one for theatrics unless it was her doing the performance.

So, that really was their intent, after all. After the archmages little speech, Dallion feared he would be executed on the spot, or condemned to spend a few centuries in a prison item. Instead, they were not only offering him a spot on their team, but using his vows to get him there.

Why? Dallion asked.

For the first time since hed seen him, Alien appeared amused.

At least you know where you stand, he muttered. Your actions have caught someones attention. Who or why is irrelevant? What matters is that for a brief moment in time, you were a hot topic in certain circles of the capital. Being the one who swore Id bring back order to the Academy, its only reasonable that I take advantage of your talents. It also helps that you have a skill or two.

And that Im an empath, Dallion thought. Of course, some sleazy political climber would take advantage of anything and anyone to his advantage, even former enemies. While all the deaths and destruction was taking place around the Learning Hall, Alien was probably making his case for taking the reins of the Academy. The previous one getting killed wasnt planned, but it helped significantly since it removed any hesitation on the matter.

And now the real reason, the man leaned back. The world is entering its endgame. The symptoms have been there for decades. The Fury wars, the cultists, the petty squabbles among nobles. Anyone stupid and with power sees an opportunity to get a bit more. Those who are smart are building up power for the final sweep. So far, three powers have emerged: us, the Azure Federation, and the Steel and Stone Alliance. One of these is going to end up the winner. The other two arent.

But at what cost?

The cost is irrelevant. The last one standing takes it all. After they mop up whats left, they can claim the world for themselves. After a few years, no one will even remember what really happened.

That much was true. Dallion had witnessed how efficient echoes, capable of affecting awakened and non-awakened alike. In a couple of years, the wars would cease to exist and the entire period would be shrouded in mystery, like many of the past ages.

Next to Dallion, Katka sighed. She was so bored that one might imagine her summoning a mobile phone from Earth. It was pretty obvious that Dallion joining was a foregone conclusion.

There were many things Dallion wanted to ask, not the least of which was the Orders response. The organization was vast, and no one really knew the extent of their power. Ignoring them just like that didnt seem like a good idea. However, no answer would matter. Dallion had pretty much condemned himself to the circle, regardless of consequences.

What do you want me to do?

For starters, you go through some training. The archmage looked at Katka. Actual training, not the useless crap novices get. You'll be joining Katka as part of the new battle mage squad.

New battle mages? After everything that happened. No way that could go wrong

, Dallion thought.

Think of it as a much-needed change of the guard. The emperor agrees, which is why there will be some changes in the policy. The problem with the previous battle mages was that there were too few of them. All actual power was concentrated among a dozen people. Everyone else did cute tricks to impress their noble sponsors, or furthered their academic knowledge. You're quite familiar with the former archmage. He was considered exceptionally powerful, yet even I could defeat him in a one-to-one fight. The devices he constructed were unparalleled. The geezer even managed to briefly open a door to Earth, all without the Moons support. That's larger than the creation of the atom bomb back on Earth. And yet he'd be utterly useless in battle.

Same as you, Dallion said to himself. He wasn't stupid enough to think he could win a fight against the man, not yet, at least. There was no doubt in his mind that other qualities had helped him rise to the top.

Plans are for a third of the total number of mages to become battle mages. That will take a few years. Meanwhile, you and a few others will pick up the slack.

That was it? There was a time when Dallion might have been impressed, even released. The archmage had started the meeting by reminding him of all the unpleasanties he had incurred to the circle. That was quickly followed by a tepid acknowledgement of his significance, and an invitation to become part of something world-changing. It was all a tried and tested business approach to manipulate a person to accept the deal given and be grateful for it. After Dallion's experiences with the general, though, the attempt felt outright sloppy.

Will I get autonomy? he asked.

The archmage's eyes widened. The old man wasn't used to anyone rejecting his offer in such fashion. Dallion could almost hear the wheels in his mind turning in an effort to rationalize what he had heard.

A few steps away, Katka broke out laughing.

Autonomy? Alien repeated.

The ability to work on my own, no strings attached. I'll still report to you and do what you order, within reason, but I won't be your brainless puppet. As you've seen, those aren't terribly efficient.

Autonomy the archmage replied. His facial features relaxed a bit. There is no autonomy. You're part of the Academy now, and you'll be here for life. There won't be any more leveling ups, no frivolous hunting, no illusion you are in control of your fate. You're an expensive cog in a very large machine. Shit will still roll downhill. I'm offering to place you closer to the top.

Call it perks then. Dallion wasn't prepared to give up. I already know that I'm skilled in two fields that most of the Academy isn't. Judging by the state of the buildings, I'm probably the only one who

could adequately improve areas. You might have the power to force me to do anything, but you cant force quality. You want to use me? Fine, but youll have to pay rent.

Dallion was half expecting the archmage to cast a bolt of lightning just for the principle of it. Nothing of the sort happened. The man remained calm, ignoring Katkas continuous laughter. If anything, he seemed more irked at her than at Dallion himself.

Good one. Katka rubbed the tears from her eyes. Being every bit petty as Dallion remembered her, she was enjoying every moment of it. Pay rent. Im stealing that.

What do you want exactly?

Discretion, Dallion said. Ill stay clear of the Academy power structure. Ill do your dirty work, but I dont want people constantly looking over my shoulder.

So, what you want is a very long leash. The archmages comment instantly made Katka stop laughing. Clearly, this was a warning to her, just as it was to Dallion. Youre not a hunter anymore, kid. Youre asking what it takes the average mage decades to achieve. Alright, as long as you show results, youll have your perks. Mess up and everything given can be taken away.

Dallion was ninety percent certain that was an empty threat. Even so, he had no intention of agonizing over the archmage.

One last thing, he said.

Theres more? Alien arched his brow.

Dont send me to fight the Steel and Stone Alliance.

Thats not a guarantee I can make. But you know that. You just dont want to fight your gorgon. Why do you bother with her, anyway? Its not like youre an item anymore.

I still care.

Youre deluding yourself, but fine. Ill delay things for as long as I can. Who knows, maybe youll get lucky and the Azures deal with her for us. Anything else?

Dallion shook his head. Hed gotten as much as he could. From here on, any further arguments might well diminish the gains hed made.

Now the boring part. As I said, youve caught the eye of a few important people. They, and a whole lot others, would like to see you be given the honor you reserve. That means your apprentice ceremony will be very official.

It wasnt the worst thing that could happen. Dallion had seen his share of snobby ceremonies. Of course, when dealing with nobles, the ceremonies tended to be behind closed doors. Countess Priscord in particular didnt want to have her public image tarnished, so she tended to reward and discipline people as quickly and silently as the situation would allow. In this case, the Academy and even the empire itself were trying to present an image of strength, so the ceremony would be as lavish and public as possible.

The new squad of battle mages, and their apprentices, will be announced.

And not the new archmage? Dallion never considered Alien to be humble, and yet the old man had consistently kept in the shadows. Despite having a hand in causing several major events, he had always shunned fame, even in Gassils memory fragment.

That announcement was made. Besides, people want to see the actions that the archmage is taking, rather than focus on who the new one is.

The ones who hold the leashes are seldom fussy, Dallion thought. It sounded like something Nil would have said.

I understand, archmage.

Good. Welcome to the Shimmering Circle.

Chapter 743: The Two Left Behind

The Academy reorganization ceremony had so much fanfare that would make the Nerosal Festival look like a paupers gathering. This time the crowds were replaced by nobles, and the nobles by members of the imperial family itself. Dallion was easily able to identify over thirty members with the imperial crest embroidered on their clothes a golden sphere surrounded by a gold or silver circle. Interestingly enough, there didnt seem to be a single archduke present.

The new archmage was also there, though he had delegated all announcements and speeches to some deputy. The mage in question wasnt in the least imposing, but based on the amount of magic flowing within him, had to be extremely powerful.

After an hour of pointless oratory exercises and mutual assurances that both the Academy and the Tamin Empire had dealt with all external and internal threats, the announcement of the new battlemage legion was made. The new formation was to be considered part of the Imperial legions, even if formally it remained part of the Academy. In practical terms, that suggested that battle mages had the authority to issue orders to imperial soldiers as well as receive such from high-ranking generals.

Twenty-seven mages were initially promoted to the new post with promises of more to follow after adequate training. Two hundred and three apprentices were also selected to join in to assist them. Dallion was among that number. Praised as being instrumental in ending the Academy split, he was made Katkas assistant along with the authority to conduct investigations on his own.

Cheska, the novice prodigy, was also mentioned as a hopeful, although it would be years before she saw the battlefield. Given that the girl wasnt present, one could assume that she was being interrogated regarding her role in Ravens plot.

Once all the talking was done, and the nobles returned to their domains and mansions, Dallion was taken to his new quarters.

The building was half the size of his novice room, although it was a hundred percent real. It was neatly arranged with sections for everything: clothes, gear, weapons, even a spot for Ruby. More importantly, it came with a large magic cube for him to use as he saw fit. There was a time when that would present more money than he could dream of. Now, it was just another freebie he saw no use of.

Wow, indoor plumbing, Dallion said, checking out the small bathroom. The Shimmering Circle had made sure to retain the comforts from home. A few more months in this place and Dallion might actually start to like it. Any illusions? he asked the shardfly on the wall.

Cant sense any, the creature replied.

Keep checking. Gem, help him out. I dont want any surprises.

Yes, boss. The aetherfish popped into existence.

For the time being, this was to be his home. It was close to Katka and the unoccupied houses of the rest of the circle. From what Dallion was told, two more had managed to survive the attack, mostly due to the fact that they rarely set foot in the Academy. Despite inquiring several times, Dallion was given no names. Alien had refused any discussions on the matter, while Katka only referred to them as the bitch and the ass. It was evident that they didnt get along too well.

One by one, Dallion placed his weapons in their respective places. It didnt elude him that Onda rolled the hammer slightly away from the harpsisword seconds after the fact. Everyone else seemed to accept the new arrangements well enough. The absence of Nil had hit the echoes worse than anyone else. Unlike the guardians, they had known the old echo their entire existence.

Are you sure you want to go? Vihrogon asked. It might be better to give it another few days.

I dont want to miss my window. Dallion looked at his weapons. After a few seconds hesitation, he took the Nox dagger and hid it in his boot. Everyones still feeling generous after the announcement. Tomorrow, things might change.

The risk exists, but I doubt youll like what you see. Remember how you felt locked in that room? The kids had it far worse.

No doubt they have. Dallion could see the interrogators invading their awakening realms on a regular basis, in their effort to obtain even the slightest shred of additional information. Moons know what spells and artifacts they had used. This way I get to see how theyre doing. And see more of the side I had chosen to ally myself with.

The armadil shield didnt argue. Neither did anyone else. Taking one final look at his quarters, Dallion straightened his green robe and left.

The cluster of buildings was in the middle of an empty field. There was nothing but grass in all directions as far as the eye could see. That, of course, was merely an illusion. After twenty steps, new parts of the terrain popped up, presenting Dallion with part of reality.

Good evening, battle apprentice, an eight foot aether golem greeted Dallion. As a result of the shardfly outbreak and subsequent deaths, new security measures had been implemented, including the construction of massive numbers of golems. How may I assist?

Dallion looked at the stone creature. It wasnt as powerful as the one he had faced several weeks ago, though impressive nonetheless.

Take me to the prisoners, Dallion said in a calm tone. I have the archmages permission.

Receiving the order, the golem knelt down, so that Dallion could climb on its shoulder. Once he did, the construct darted forward with speed, rivalling Dallions own. It had no way of determining the validity of the order and, thanks to Dallions new promotion, was forced to comply.

Running through the maze of illusions that composed the Academy, the golem stopped in front of a small fort-like structure.

We have arrived, battle apprentice. It knelt again, allowing him to descend.

Thanks. Wait here. I wont be long.

Yes, battle apprentice.

Not too far away, more golem constructs were building an expansion to the structure. Referenced as the Mage Cellar, the prison was likely to see a lot more occupants than it had in its entire history. The place was reserved for the handful of powerful and uncontrollable individuals that emerged every few years, or dangerous opponents of the archmage. With half of the Academy fled, it was going to need a lot more space.

What do you want? the mage with massive sideburns that had questioned Dallion a week ago asked. The man didnt seem at all impressed by the green robe Dallion was wearing.

Ive come to see the kids, Dallion said, not in the least intimidated. The archmage approved it.

The mage narrowed his eyes.

You can check with him, if you like.

Technically, Dallions rank was several times lower than that of the mage. As part of the Shimmering circle, though, he had enough authority to abuse.

This way, the mage hissed, turning around.

A door emerged in the wall, letting them inside. The place was small and smelly. There were no illusions here, just wood and cold stone. Dozens of spells and magic symbols were everywhere. Some were specifically made to keep the place constantly cold and drafty. Dallion even noticed a few that drained any light in their vicinity.

You wont learn anything we havent, the mage said.

Probably not.

Then why see them?

We were noticed together. I think I owe them a few words.

The mage shrugged. Suspicion emanated from him like a beacon, as he tried to think of something the interrogators had missed.

The cells nearest to the door were empty. It was only when Dallion had crossed half the corridor that he started to see actual prisoners. There were about a dozen of them, all linked to the conspiracy in one way or another. Most were apprentices, although there were a few mages as well.

Is Palag here? Dallion asked.

Hes somewhere else, the mage replied laconically, suggesting he didnt know much on the matter, either.

Upon reaching the corridor, the wall shifted into a marred wooden door. A small guard room had also appeared, with a couple of mages playing cards. They gave Dallion and his escot a bored look, then went back to their game.

Nice to see such diligent people guarding the Academys most dangerous, Dallion thought.

Through there. The mage stopped. Close the door before opening the next.

Got it. Dallion nodded.

Moving on, he opened the door and stepped inside. The new room was merely three steps in length. It didnt seem to go anywhere. When Dallion closed the door behind him, though, a new one appeared on the opposite side.

Airlock security? he thought. Cool idea.

The second door led to a normal sized room. While not as miserable as the ones hed passed, it was clearly a cell. The stone floor was bare, as were the walls. There was no draft or cold. Light was provided only by a few crystals on the edges of the ceilings. A small table, and two wooden beds with cotton blankets were the only pieces of furniture present. Well, that and a couple of bed pots.

Dallion? Raven stood up from his bed. It is you.

Excluding the simple clothes, the boy looked no different from before. He remained clean and well kept, his wounds had been healed, and there was no indication he had lacked food. It was his glance that was differenta glance that seemed tired beyond his years.

I told you hed come, the black-haired said to Phoil, who was attempting to sleep on the other bed.

The large boy stirred, cracking an eye open to check. Seeing that raven hadnt lied, he relaxed back down.

Dont worry about him. Raven cracked a smile. He doesnt talk much.

You were imprisoned, Dallion said. Given it was a common practice for nobles, there was no reason for him to be shocked, and yet his mind still struggled with the thought.

Fifty years. Raven nodded. Gives you a lot of time to think. They gave us a break every ten years to continue with the questioning. I despised it at first, but later I learned to appreciate it. Fifty years without a break he shook his head. They dont train you that growing up.

I bet not. Dallion looked around for a place to sit.

Oh, you can take the table. Raven offered, catching his glance. We dont use it for much. Theyre afraid to bring us books out of fear we can use it to cast a spell. He let out a bitter laugh. They dont bring much food, either. Id have offered some, but

Foods crap! Phoil said from his bed.

Yeah, theres that. Raven agreed. So, tell us. Whats it like outside? Is the war over?

That was a tough question to answer. Forcing a child to grow up in solitary confinement was beyond cruel. On the one hand, they had mentally grown and matured, but without any references. They had experienced all the negative emotions: hunger, thirst, fear, solitude. They had contemplated a lot, all without a sense of time or reality. In their minds, they were middle-aged men abandoned by friends and family alike.

It hasn't started, Dallion replied. Our fight was two weeks ago.

Two weeks? Raven stared blankly in the air. All this was only two weeks?

Told you. Phoel waved a finger in the air.

Shut up, Phoel! Raven hissed. Two weeks I thought it would be longer. Time is messed up in a prison domain. So, nothing happened?

The empire is still a mess. There's a new archmage. That's pretty much it.

You got promoted, I see.

Yep. Dallion glanced at his robe. A few hours ago. I'm a battle apprentice now. Something like a battle mage, but a lot less significant.

The joke wasn't meant to be good, but it made Raven laugh. After all the time in isolation, he had learned not to be picky.

I'm to continue with my training before they send me out.

To the front?

Anywhere they choose. A lot of mages went rogue. There's no telling who might cause trouble. Dallion looked at the table again. Everything considered, he preferred to remain standing. Is there anything you want? I can try to get it for you.

Freedom? Raven asked.

I definitely walked into that one. Dallion shook his head. I'll try to get the archmage to allow some illusions in your room. It'll be a lot

No! Raven shouted, almost in panic. No more illusions. This might be crap, but at least it's real.

Whatever he'd been through in the prison item had left a mark on him. It would be years before he got back to his former self, if ever. In a way, he reminded Dallion of Dhermas' former village chief. Decades later, he'd still have nightmares about his imprisonment. Maybe the kids would have better luck.

Maybe some proper food, then? Dallion offered. He'd wanted to have a chat with them, but now that he had, he could see there were so few topics to talk about. His presence was painful for everyone.

Food's good. The black-haired man nodded. Right, Phoel?

And wine! the other said. Lots and lots of wine.

Dallion didn't know about the last part. Getting them drunk in their present state was a terrible idea, not to mention that physically they were still children. I'll do my best, though.

See? I told you hell come for us.

You said that your father will come for us, the large boy grumbled.

Well, Ill go now and

Wait! Raven jumped from the bed. Dont go yet.

Internally, Dallion sighed. They were going to ask that he stay and chat with them for a while. Normally, he wouldnt hesitate, but it didnt look like that would do them any good.

Theres something I want to give

We, Phoil corrected.

Something that we want to give you.

Thanks, but I really Dallion began to protest. Before he could finish his sentence, a bright purple light filled the room.

A small amethyst gem had found its way in the large boys hand, shining with the power of divine magic.

How the Dallion was dumbfounded. It was impossible for him not to recognize that, and yet he still couldnt believe it. A Moonstone? I thought he looked at Raven. The ex-noble looked back with a sad smile on his face. How?

Moonstones cant be taken, only given, Raven said. They made us give a Moon vow not to use it. Someone had a nasty sense of humor.

Its called torture. Phoil added.

Undauntedly it was. Having the power of a Moon at their disposal, yet never allowed to use it. Whoever had come up with a punishment had done a good job of messing up their minds.

Raven took the get from Phoil, then shoved it into Dallions hands, forcibly closing his fingers round it. You take it, he said. Its yours.

Dallion didnt know what to think. Could this be a trick? A final trump card to mess him up? There didnt seem to be any anger or deceit coming from either of them. If anything, Dallion could sense gratitude and joy.

Not to be ungrateful, but are you sure?

You could have killed both of us, but didnt. Most of all, after all those years, you still came back.

There was no point in explaining again that for Dallion, it had only been two weeks. It was obvious they wanted to get rid of the gem just as much as they wanted him to have it.

Thanks. Dallion activated his Vermillion ring. The Moonstone sunk into the palm of his hand, vanishing into his realm. Ill remember that.

Its fine. Raven staggered back to his bed like an old man. Just do me one favor, if you could?

If its within my power.

At some point, youll meet my brother. I know youre an empath, but when you do, tear his arms off. I dont want someone like him to end up ruling the world.

Chapter 744: The Battle Apprentice

Five mages split the air, darting at the small hamlet like hawks in prey. Spells shot down, tearing structures out of the ground, surrounding them in massive spheres of purple, like enormous bubbles in the air. The only building left was a solid two-story mansion right in the middle.

Seven new mages emerged, swooping in-between the floating houses. Half of them cast illusion spells, causing them to vanish once more. The rest focused on the main building.

Streaks of light hit the upper floor, slicing off segments of the roof and upper walls as if they were puzzle pieces of a child's toy. The inside was completely revealed: old broken furniture, the remains of a bed, filled with animal poop, and rags that at some point must have been a carpet.

Every object was drawn up and encircled in a new sphere of magic, as the house continued to be deconstructed. Segments of the floor moved aside, followed by the lower walls. Soon enough, a stone stairwell became visible, winding down from the basement.

Finally, Dallion said, hovering above. His dark green robe distinguishing him from the lighter variety the other mages were wearing. His hands moved together in front of him, his fingers drawing dozens of symbols every second. An intricate spell sphere took form, shooting aether chains at everything below.

One good tug and the stairwell was ripped from the ground. Parts of two new rooms had become visible in the spot where it had been.

Instantly, four mages flew in, spells at the ready. There were several flashes of light, then silence.

Gem, do you sense anything? Dallion asked.

Hmm, err No, boss. A jellyfish made entirely of aether emerged above Dallion's right shoulder. There are some traces of magic, but

Theres nothing here, apprentice. One of the mages emerged from the basement area. Its all empty.

Giving a sign to the other mages to remain diligent, Dallion floated down into the lowest room. As the other mage had said, there was nothing there, not even any furniture remains. Cautiously, he stopped an inch from the ground. Several aether orbs provided light to the space, all of them cast moments ago.

He was here, Dallion said.

How can you be so sure? A woman floated beside him. The place looks like its been deserted for decades, at least.

This is the only building without a guardian. Also, its far too clean.

As he said that, all the other mages looked around. Although crude, the stone floor was spotless, lacking any dirt or animal droppings.

Apprentice! a yell came from the room above. We found something.

Quickly Dallion floated up. The new room was virtually identical to the one below. The only difference was the presence of a single quill located in the far corner. The quill was in perfect condition, and rather new. Also, it had an item guardian.

Are you Dallion? the quill asked, as Dallion approached it.

I am, Dallion replied.

He told me to tell you no hard feelings.

No hard feelings, Dallion let out a dry laugh.

Apprentice? one of the nearby mages looked at him.

This whole thing was one big wild goose chase. Afzorg wanted us to get here. Thats why he left a small present for us.

Dallion moved the fingers of his left hand. A green sphere surrounded the quill, lifting it from the ground.

Someone, inform the Academy. Ill have a chat with the area guardians, but were done here.

If hes left, that means hes been here. The female mage insisted. Ill tell the cloud sentries to keep an eye out. Maybe theyll spot him.

The chances were remote, but Dallion didnt argue. Waving his hand, he flew out of the buildings basement.

Another lead gone cold. This was the third time that Adzorg had managed to elude him, and just when Dallion was co certain, hed managed to corner the old man, only to find the former archmage two steps ahead.

Things had changed a lot in the last six months. After suffering significant initial losses, the Tamin Empire had gone through internal reorganizations and was slowly turning things around. It still hadnt regained all that it had lost, but it was slowly getting there. The Dreud province was no more. After the open betrayal, the archduke had fled along with his entire household and most of his forces. The few nobles that had been left behind had done through severe interrogation, then depending on the degree of their involvement, had their name erased, spent decades in a prison item, then banished to Nerosal or some other city on the fringes of the empire. As for the Wetie province, the civil war ended in a diplomatic stalemate. The emperor declared Archduke Lanitol the rightful ruler of the area. At the same time, Countess Priscord was made an Archduke herself and given what was left of the former lands of the Dreud province. Naturally, the territory was renamed to bear her name.

Dallion wasnt particularly pleased, given what shed done to him. At the same time, at least Nerosal was free of her presence. From what hed learned, the last of her entourage were making their way out of her former territories in the coming week. Things remained tense, though. Grudges between settlements remained, and it was going to take a while before the overseers could smooth things out. And then there was all the awakened caught in the middle: guilds, mercenaries, organizations. It was said that the Order of the Seven Moons were overseeing things to put an end to hostilities. That seemed like the optimal compromise, although there was no telling where things would go from there.

The next few hours Dallion spent questioning the building and item guardians of the deserted village. They knew nothing, of course. Most hadnt even noticed anyone enter their area prior to the

mage attack. The key settlement guardian was aware of a disturbance, but in his state, he could tell little more than sensing a change taking place. It had been half a century since the village had been populated. Like many unsuccessful settlements, the place was used as a stopping point for caravans, travelers, and the occasional hunter. Those who were awakened improved it just enough so as to keep it standing for a few more years. The rest merely did their best not to add to the ruin. It was a sad sight. The least Dallion could do was mend and improve most of them. Being level seventy-seven allowed him to do a lot, but not everything.

Once finished, he flew back to a nearby cloud sentry. Eight furies were there. Thankfully, none of them were crimson.

Another bust? The cloud leader asked.

That was one thing Dallion admired about fury mercenaries, they always spoke their mind.

Yep. Dallion sat down on one of the sea iron seats, prepared for people like him. Technically, mages had spells that could allow them to interact with cloud matter, but that was still slightly beyond Dallions capabilities. He left us a souvenir.

Nice guy. Guess he wasnt archmage for nothing.

You can say that again.

How many foils does that make this month?

Just him, or in general? Dallion joined in the sarcasm party.

In general.

Seven.

A few of the furies whistled. The rest just laughed.

Seven, the fury repeated. Must have been a slow month. Usually, youre in the double digits.

What can I say? Ive been practicing.

The banter continued throughout the day as the cloud sped up on its way to the Academy. After the recent restructuring, the battle mage headquarters had been erected there, holding a force of five hundred and eleven people. The number sounded impressive, but out of them, only a few dozen were adequate in combat. Everyone else, even the capable ones, was in training. Many felt ready they could take on more responsibility, though they hadnt experienced real combat. As Dallion had said many times, casting spells at a defenseless enemy from a distance didnt constitute combat. In a way, it felt like a repeat of the time he was training to become an apprentice hunter, only now the roles were reversed.

I think you had it easy back then, Eury, Dallion thought. There was just one of me.

Battle apprentice! someone shouted the moment Dallion set foot on the ground. Internally, he felt like facepalming. However, appearances had to be kept. As far as everyone was concerned, he was the battle apprenticethe one with the most

combat experience after the actual battle mages, and a member of the Shimmering Circle.

Dallion waited patiently as mages rushed into something they considered a military formation. It was more than clear that mages and military didn't mix. No wonder the former battle mages were a group of solo elites. Egos tended to clash too much in small spaces.

Emotions of anger, envy, and spite emanated from everywhere. All the mages wanted to present themselves as first among equals. Sadly, no one was particularly fond of the equal part.

Doing well, I see, Dallion said, struggling to keep a straight face. Is battle mage Katka here?

Yes, battle apprentice! half a dozen mages shouted simultaneously.

Quickly, Dallion raised his hand. He really didn't want to go through all this. Most of the mages were competent on mission thanks to his leadership skills but painfully chaotic when left to their own devices.

I'll go see her. Keep on doing what you're doing.

You need to be a bit stricter with them, the armadil shield guardian said from Dallion's realm. Each of them thinks of you as a buddy they want to impress.

Tell me about it, Dallion whispered. It was worse than running a guild of newbies in an MMO. Thankfully, his image provided him with a few perks, including not being bothered when he appeared annoyed or busy.

Rushing into the building, Dallion followed the staircases to the top floor, where Katka's office was located. Officially, she was supposed to spend most of her time there, but being one to get easily annoyed with crowds, she preferred to stay at the circles building cluster instead.

The door opened before Dallion got a chance to knock on it. Normally, it was Katka who did that by casting a spell from the other side of the room. This time, a crimson fury stood there, standing there with an unnerving smile.

Back so fast? Katka asked from her usual spot on the couch across the room. The old man tricked you again, eh?

Looks like. Dallion stepped in. An air current closed the door behind him.

Oh, don't worry. You can talk in front of the lieutenant. He's just here to share a few details from the western front.

Such as? Dallion asked. I heard we've been losing a lot of clouds there.

Some setbacks are inevitable, the fury said. Very much like your attempt to capture archmage Adzorg, was it?

You know his name perfectly, Dallion thought.

His echo was my mentor for millennia. Dallion made his way towards Katka. He didn't sit on the couch, of course; he wouldn't even if he were invited to. He's

bound to have more tricks than me. Well still get him. Its a matter of time. Besides, I know what hes really after.

As is complete victory. The fury nodded.

Dallion couldnt tell whether the lieutenant was mocking him, or really believed the official propaganda. The nobles seemed to and, so far, they were proven right.

One small clarification. Im not here to talk about troop actions. I just thought youd like to know that one of our patrols spotted a vortex glimmer as they were patrolling an unclaimed area.

Both Dallion and Katka reacted. The woman even sat up from her couch upon hearing the news. Vortex glimmers were sort of premonitions associated with the appearance of a high-level vortex. When it came to time and magic, it could be said that they didnt always go hand in hand. From a scholarly point of view, glimmers were the effects of a vortex appearing before it had actually done so. A lot of unknowns remained, but it was confirmed that only high-level manifestations had them, and also the greater the level, the greater the time between the glimmer and the permanent entry in the world.

What level? Katka asked.

It was difficult to say, but at the very least, a seven. The fury smiled.

A seven, Dallion thought. That would be enough to boost his level to twenty-eight, if not more. With the war, magic had become an invaluable commodity. And while the Academy had low-level magic in abundance, any vortex that could boost ones magic level was a rarity sought by all. At present, Dallion had only managed to find a three-level vortex thanks to his aetherizer.

Ive already informed the emperor, but I thought the battle mages should know as well. It was more than clear that the lieutenant wanted something in return. Even in times of war, favors and politics took central stage.

Youll have the battle mages vast gratitude, Katka said.

Of course. Ill gladly share its location.

Chapter 745: Effects of the Curse

Sunsets were always pleasant in Dallions realm. Lately, this was the only place he had to himself. Here he could rest, train, and spend time with his echoes, guardians, and companions. Sadly, this was also a place in which he could see reminders of those hed lost.

First Gleam, now Nil, Dallion said, looking at the bridge remains that once had connected the main part of his realm to the Vermillions islands. Sometimes I wonder who will be next.

It better not be me, Vihrogon said, joining him at the edge of the cliff. The being was the dryad guardian of the armadil shield. Once a sword marshal and high ranked member of the dryad army, he now was nothing but a companion armor banished, never to set foot in the real world again. Youll find them, eventually. Both of them.

I wont find Nil.

True, but in a way, the original cant be too different from the echo.

Dallion shook his head.

Hey, Im still a companion gear, remember? I know Ive been slacking for a while, but hey, I have a lot of free time now that youre mostly using magic.

Im not in the mood

I see that. Losing your mentor and father figure is always a blow, no matter how you try to cushion it. Using music on yourself was a nice touch, but thats temporary.

Dont go there.

I know, I know. Its no secret that talking to you right now is pointless.

That was an understatement. The loss of Nil had caused Dallion to relapse into his distrust of the world. It didnt help that he was serving people he strongly disliked. On the surface, there was little change. On the contrary, many would say that Dallion had grown, taking on important roles, succeeding in missions that battle mages failed. In truth, there was a lot lurking in his mind, which was apparent to everyone within his realm.

Two words, Vihrogon said. Awakening trial.

Sure. I couldnt complete it before. What makes you think Ill manage now?

Who knows? Despite everything, youve a bit smarter now. Besides, passing it is not a requirement. Just having it might be enough to shove you in the right direction.

Reality shifted, bringing Dallion back to his room. Some would consider it rude to exit a realm during a conversation, but then again, it was his realm, so he could do pretty much anything he wanted in it.

Dallion made a step towards the table, when a sudden chill passed through his body.

Damn it!

He thought as all warmth was drained from his hands and fingers. *Not again*

All color faded away, plunging his surroundings into grayness. Whatever strength he had was gone. Even the Moonstone hidden in his realm could no longer provide him with magic. All time stopped, locking Dallion in a single frame of lifecold, alone, and powerless. However, it was now that the pad part began.

It always continued with someone from his past. There was no logic to determine who or when the curse took place. The only thing certain was that the intensity kept increasing. At first it had been the nightmares, then the cold that accompanied them. Now Dallion was torn out of time, left to experience living hallucinations.

Missed me? a female voice said.

Dallion feared that his nightmare would be related to Eury again. Instead, when the figure gained solid form, he saw that it was a fury.

Jiroh, he thought.

That was exactly something the Moons would come up with. The real Jiroh no longer existed in the world. After years of searching, she had finally managed to find a way to her own. Dallion had been with her when it happened, getting himself pulled in by accident. Since then, he'd seen her a few times more, always in dreams. As tempting as it was to think that the Moons had granted him a chat with his friend, he knew that this was merely the face of his torture.

You've lost weight, the fury said. Each sound she made split the air, slashing Dallion's skin like a razor blade. Guess you haven't been eating well with all those attack missions you've been on.

Blades of air slashed through his arms and chest, leaving the clothes covering them intact.

Just get it over with, he thought, incapable of moving a muscle.

You're like that? A slap on the wrist before you can run off to do what your heart desires. That's not how curses work.

Cuts covered Dallion's legs. If time wasn't frozen, he would have fallen over by now, lurching on the floor in agony.

I tried to find the reason! He wanted to scream. There are so many reasons. It takes time to go through them all.

The fury shook her head. Walking a full circle around him, she then stopped in front of him, passing her hand over his cheek.

I know you have. And I sympathize. But the price must be paid. The more you delay, the greater the pain interest. Dozens of new wounds formed beneath Dallion's clothes. That's an interesting phrase, don't you think? Pain interest? You could have stopped it at the very beginning. Then again, maybe you wouldn't have. Even after all this is over, you won't do a thing. You'll just cast a few spells, have Lux hide your wounds, then continue as nothing had happened, telling yourself that the next few weeks would be pain free.

The fury stepped away. Sparks passed through the white cloud matter that composed her clothes.

This time it won't be so easy. She looked Dallion in the eye. I know the real reason you want to go to Nerosal. There was a time when I would have approved of it. Now, though Bolts of lightning shot out from her hands, striking Dallion in the face.

Everything went black, leaving only the pain.

Since it's you, I know you won't try deliberately to hurt her, Jiroh continued. The cutting pain throughout Dallion's body intensified. Maybe you'll manage to pull it off. Maybe you'll manage to pull everything off. Just don't become like my hunter mentor. Is that clear?

Yes! Dallion said, collapsing to the floor. Ill

Time had returned to normal. The colors were back, along with the ability to control his own body. As all the times before, the effects of the curse had come to their end. Only the pain remained.

Breathing heavily, Dallion cast a quick pain relief spell. It was alarming how well he'd gotten at doing it.

Layer by layer, the agony was peeled off until only numbness remained.

Lux, Gem, he whispered.

Without needing to be told twice, the firebird moved the bladebow out from its spot at the weapons rack and onto Dallion. Blue flames surrounded it, healing any wound it came in contact with. Moments later, the aetherfish also appeared, casting its own set of healing spells.

Its over, Dallion thought.

Life is painful in the fast lane, Vihrogon said from Dallions domain. Maybe we should have finished that talk.

It took less than a minute for Dallion to get healed. The mental pain lingered for a bit longer. A large part of him agreed with everything that had been said, and yet he couldnt do anything about it. Showing weakness would compromise his position within the Academy, and if he was weak, there'd be fewer things he could achieve. Katka had all but told him to prepare for the vortex expedition. The stakes were high enough that both sides preferred to banish high-level vortexes without getting anything for it, than letting anyone else have it. There was a very good chance that a mage fight would break out.

The numbness faded away after another ten minutes. The only traces left behind were the blood that had soaked Dallions clothes. Unlike normal nightmares, the curse had progressed to the type that left a mark. In the past, that would have been awkward, but thanks to spellcraft and a quick gesture of the hand the bloodstains were gone.

Gearing up, Dallion packed his backpack, then took the thread splitter and his crafting hammer. Looking at the larger weapons, he hesitated, but ultimately decided to pick them as well. His plan was to remain incognito in Nerosal, after all.

Just as he was about done, there was a knock on the door. The problem was that the knock came from inside.

So, you really plan to go there? Katka asked. She didnt look particularly pleased.

Its the city where I met Adzorg, Dallion lied. With the countess gone, itll be safe to look around a bit. Maybe Ill find a few clues. How did it go with the lieutenant?

A lot of promises were made. He even took a squad of mages.

Dallion arched a brow.

Dont worry, I didnt give him the best. Didnt give him the worst, either. Dont want to have them dropping like flies.

Now that they were under her command, Katka was untypically concerned with the wellbeing of the mages. The real reason was the unofficial ongoing competition between battle mages. Since Katka only gained her title thanks to the archmage, she had a lot to prove. Thanks to Dallion, she was doing a pretty good job so far.

He told me a lot of interesting things, most of them lies. Just like youre doing now.

Was I lying? Dallion Ticked the armadil shield between his back and the backpack.

Ive no idea why youre going to Nerosal, but it isnt to hunt down Adzog, and it isnt to reminisce about old times, either.

Dallion remained silent.

I dont know what youre really after and I dont care as long as you dont mess up the bottom line. So, will you?

No plans for that.

Good.

Theres a favor to ask, though.

Katka crossed her arms.

Its nothing major. I cant tell you yet. Not until I get back.

So, thats how it is? Better not press your luck. If I dont like it you wont have it.

Fair enough.

All set up, Dallion opened the door.

Talking about favors, Cheska was made top apprentice.

Dallion felt a slight shiver. Hed had a talk with the girl, making her promise she wouldnt stand out. Apparently, the promise was as worthless as marsh air. It was always a long shot that a prodigy like her stopped showing off. Approaching attention, though, was a sure way to get her recruited to the battle mages, and that was more than Dallion could bear. It was bad enough that so many of them were practically teens.

No surprises there, he tried to appear calm. Did you snatch her for the cause?

Tried to, but someone beat me to it. Shell be helping with actual magic research. Boring, but itll keep her off the front. Thought you might want to know.

Dallion nodded. Was Katka trying to be nice to him?

Just one last piece of advice. Id suggest you stop by Lanitol first, preferably a few more cities on your way to Nerasol. The province belongs to the Archduke Lanitol now. Thats what the emperor has decreed.

Thats what the people must see, Dallion added. Do you want me to spend a few days partying with him as well?

Thats your business. Dont make cracks, dont make waves. Although, if you do, well have your back.

The Academy always takes care of its own, Dallion thought. If he wanted, he could destroy a whole neighborhood and still not get punished. It had happened before and more frequently than people thought. Such power terrified him; being able to wield it ten times as much.

No cloud waited for Dallion as he left the building. The vast majority had set out on patrol or conducting new missions. Only a red cloud was there, like a smattering of blood in the sky.

Thankfully, that was no longer his problem. Right now, all he had to do was arrive in Nerasol safely and see a few old friends.

Chapter 746: Leaderless Nerosal

Passing through the provincial capital was the smart choice. Dallions life would have been a lot easier, not to mention it was likely hed get quite a few generous gifts from the archduke and nobles there. Being a mage was always a big deal, amplified considerably after the end of the internal conflict that had wrecked Wetie.

Dallion chose to send a courier letter instead, informing the archduke of his visit. That was he was in the clear, since hed addressed the rightful ruler first. Of course, the visit was going to take place on the way back from Nerosal. This was, no one could afford to openly cause trouble, and Dallion could enjoy a bit of anonymity for a while.

If Nil were here, hed tell you thats a terrible idea, the armadil shield said. I fully approve of it.

Im sure you do. Dallion kept on flying. He had made sure to draw a few illusion symbols on his robe, hiding the fact that he was a mage. The only people who could tell were other mages and the occasional noble with a kaleidervristo. Since artifacts were far from fashionable, the chances of the latter were incredibly small.

As we went over the land, Dallion saw the scars that the war between Priscord and Lanirol had caused. The issue wasnt the cities: those were quickly repaired. The minor villages, and the wilderness itself, were at times changed beyond recognition. Hills, mountains and forests were severely impacted, sliced up by Moons know how many line attacks. Every so often there would be large clusters of cratersnow willed with rain waterwhere none had been before. Here and there, even field fortifications were visible, left abandoned.

Amateur stuff, the shield said.

Which side?

Both of them. The positions are bad for both attack or defense. If it were me, Id

They used chainlings, a melody of sounds interrupted. Never using her own voice, this was the way the harpsisword preferred to communicate.

Chainlings? Dallion split into instances. Are you sure, Harp?

Theyre long gone now. Whoever used them tried to cover things up, but they still left traces.

Dallion took the guardian from her word. He himself wasnt able to see even a hint of chainling presence, and neither was Nox.

Ill keep an eye out. Thanks.

The guardian didnt respond, but Dallion felt warmth emanating from her in his realm. Even if less talkative, the nymph was still looking out for him.

The city of Nerosal seemed like a shell of its former self, as if a puppy had grown two sizes larger, then shrunk again, causing its skin to get baggy. Almost all the entire section between the city itself and the outer walls were ill kept and empty. The contest had probably used the area as a troop staging ground. Now that the fighting and armies were gone, she hadn't bothered to fix things, leaving her successor to deal with it. Barracks and watchtowers were left abandoned, no longer worth more than the materials they were made out of. Ironically, this was closer to the Nerosal Dallion was familiar with.

Landing a safe distance from the outer gate, Dallion made one final check to be sure that his illusion was still in effect, then started the long walk to the city. Soon enough, the sensation of millions of guardians swept over him. It took him a few moments to get used to the sensation. Even with the missions Katka sent him, it was rare that he went somewhere with so many guardians in one place. The thought of putting on his blocker ring came to mind. In the current situation, doing so could turn out to be rather risky. Conflicts tended to make nobles paranoid, and Dallion didn't want to start on the wrong foot.

A squad of twenty soldiers was standing at the city gate. All of them were awakened, and based on the wounds, gear, and calm demeanors, they had seen more than their fair share of fighting. Spotting Dallion, one of them made a sign for the otherworlder to approach. The rest didn't seem to mind, but Dallion noticed that a few of them were discretely holding the hilts of their weapons.

Hunter, Dallion said, showing his hunter's emblem.

Hunter? One of the soldiers asked. He was in his forties, and fortunately, wasn't someone that Dallion had met during his time in the city. What brings you here?

The usual. Dallion shrugged. There's always business after wars. I thought I'd see if anyone needs my services.

One of the soldiers gritted his teeth.

What's your level? the first soldier asked.

Enough to handle most things. Pretty much anything except a dragon. Dallion deliberately split into a dozen instances, to prove his point.

The display was impressive enough to attract attention, though not to the point of causing alarm. Deep hatred emanated from the soldiers. Most likely they didn't hold any loyalty to the former countess, but still saw Dallion as a vulture who was quick to swoop to the city now that the danger was over.

I'll see to him personally, a female voice said. A figure entirely in black had appeared five steps from Dallion.

Several of the soldiers drew their weapons. Upon seeing who it was, they quickly sheathed them again, moving back with a bow.

Overseer. The highest-ranking soldier captain by the looks of his uniform stood to attention. We didn't want to trouble you.

Fresh skills never trouble me, the overseer said. It's been a while since there were hunters in Nerosal. I'd welcome the bad streak to come to an end.

Yes, overseer. The captain gestured for his man to move aside.

Dallion waited until they had done so, then calmly walked forward.

Thank you for greeting me in person, overseer, he whispered as he reached her. I feel honored. The last time they had seen each other, she was trying to capture and kill him on the countess orders. Now, she couldnt, even if she wanted to.

Nerosal is always happy to welcome its former heroes, she whispered back. Especially when they come from the Academy.

I guess news travels fast.

Not so much. Still, I manage to hear things.

There was a time when Dallion was in awe of her power. Half human, half chainling, the overseer was the embodiment of the citys guardian. There werent many things within the domain of Nerosal that she wasnt aware of. Without a doubt, she had sensed Dallions presence the moment he had stepped through the outer gate. To make things more complicated, she was also the great aunt of his Dherma friends and a close friend of his grandfather. Technically, she was over eighty years old. However, that didnt matter time had stopped pattering for her even since shed become the being she was today.

The streets look the same, Dallion said as they walked. I was expecting a lot more buildings to have popped up.

There were a few, but Archduke Priscord took them when she left for her new province.

Well, she always was pragmatic.

She would have taken the castle as well if it wasnt for whats hidden beneath it.

Dallion tried to imagine that. He could actually picture it: one great crater in the middle of the city, while Priscord abused her influence to have the building and all underground dungeons transported north.

Whos in charge now? he asked.

Thats a bit tricky. Officially, Archduke Linatol must designate a count to take over the city. Given that it still rivals the provincial capital, there arent too many nobles willing to take the post.

Only nobles could have such problems, Dallion thought.

Until thats done, Im in charge, along with the generous assistance of the Order.

Several voices yelled at Dallion in greeting. They werent people, though, but guardians who still remembered him from the time hed frequented Nerosal adequately. It was almost comical that his spells and the countess limiting echoes werent able to hide him from a bunch of buildings and household items.

Gradually, the road got louder and louder, becoming an all-encompassing wave. Dallion definitely didn't miss this. Then again, he had long since trained his mind to ignore anything that he didn't deem important.

A new bishop arrived, along with his very own citadel, the overseer added. If I knew who you were, I'd suggest going to see him as quickly as possible, but I suspect you have other things in mind.

Yeah, yeah I do. Dallion paused.

The smell of freshly cooked awakened food hit his senses. It was a stark difference from what he was given at the Academy lately. In order to get mages used to field conditions, the archmage had ordered that the food provided be the most basic of the basic. Considering that a large part of the mages came from wealthy and even noble families, basic was a nuanced term. Yet, that was only valid for those with an awakened level of twenty or less.

Are any of the Icepickers still around?

Funny you should ask. Your old guildmaster is one of the people Archduke Lanitol is considering giving the city to. In the past, that would have been unimaginable, but war makes strange bedfellows.

And the rest? Estezol? Vend? March? Dallion waited for several seconds. Adzorg?

Vend and March were officially pardoned, so they should be here somewhere. I'm sorry to say that I still haven't rebuilt the guildhall. The guardian is still alive in a terrible shape, but alive. Maybe you can restore him?

Yeah, I can do that later.

Later works as well.

And Adzorg?

Spikes here, the overseer continued, as if ignoring his question. He's become a major nuisance. Not enough to have anyone do something about it. A few more of your guildmates could be found doing odd jobs. As for the old man, I have no idea.

Something in the way she said it made Dallion suspicious.

I could never tell when he was here and when not. I know that he was before the poison plague, but what happened after that the woman shrugged.

Yet again, the old man was a step ahead. Not that Dallion expected anything less.

I'm sure he'll show up, Dallion said. He usually does. Anyway, I think I'll go rest.

You can go to the palace, the overseer suggested. It's empty.

Thanks, but I think I'll go to the gremlin. Hannah's still here, right?

Yes. Disappointment rang in the woman's voice. She's still here. Not sure how she'll react when she sees you.

Dallion didn't either. Once he and the overseer said their goodbyes, the woman vanished in mid-air, just as suddenly as she had appeared. It was only then that Dallion noticed that the people on the

street weren't staring at him. Even in a city the size of Nerosal, people would pause what they were doing to see who their overseer was talking to. That is, unless she had made sure that they didn't.

Thanks for the gift, Dallion thought. No doubt this was her apology for what happened last time.

The Gremlins Timepiece, was just as Dallion remembered it. A few empty tables were placed outside, probably in anticipation of the new city ruler. A single patron one of the regulars Dallion had served ages ago sat at one, drinking a large quartz glass of wine.

She kept your glass, the armadil shield said.

No, that's not my glass. It's just one like it.

Standing here, a feeling filled the air. If he concentrated, Dallion could almost imagine back to the time he was a low-level awakened arriving in the big city for the very first time. He had no job back then, barely any money to speak of, and a set of village clothes he had kept on mending non-stop during his trip through the wilderness. Hannah had offered him a job and a place to stay. It could be said that Dallion owed everything to her. In turn, he had let her down more often than not, and now he had come to take away one of the people she valued the most.

Chapter 747: Old Advice and New

There was no way of telling how Hannah would react upon seeing Dallion. Considering how he'd left, she had every right to be furious. She could shout at him or even toss him out as she'd done with a few customers she didn't approve of. On the other hand, given her obsession of helping lost causes, she could be glad to see him. Possibly, even if highly unlikely, she might get emotional.

When Dallion stepped into the inn, he was quick to find out. The innkeeper sat at the bar, an annoyed expression on her face. Looking at him as if he'd come a few hours late for work, she poured a glass of amber liquid and slid it to the spot across the counter.

Thought you might show up, she poured herself a glass as well. Didn't think you'd drop by so soon after Priscord had gone. Then again, you always were reckless. Reckless and stupid.

Dallion walked up to the empty chair by the glass and sat down. The inn was largely empty. A few of the regulars were finishing their meals. None of them seemed particularly interested in Dallion's arrival. In fact, the way they were behaving, it was as if they hadn't seen him at all. There was a time when Dallion would have had questions on the matter. Now, he could see the threads of magic going from the kitchen to each of the people. The spells weren't something that he recognized; they were vastly different to the Academy magic he had studied but they were very much active.

So that was why you were never worried about what could be said here. He took a sip of the drink. It had a rich taste of mango and peppers. That's why you were never worried anything might happen to this place, no matter who won the city.

I still have taxes to pay, same as everyone else. But yes, it's good to have some support.

Di not here?

I sent her on an errand. Hannah was quick to say.

Right. Dallion took another sip. The drink wasn't to his taste. I don't expect you'll tell me where Adzorg is? He's gotten himself in a bit of trouble.

Wouldn't be the first time. The woman's expression didn't budge. But, no, I have no idea where he's at. He left the city a while back.

And you haven't kept in touch?

I know why you're here, Dal, so let's not bullshit each other. And don't you try anything with that music skill of yours. The captain made sure that no one in the city could find him before he left. He hasn't kept in touch and he hasn't left me any messages for you. The woman grumbled. To think you'd be after him after everything he's done for you.

You did a lot for me. He did the bare minimum, so I fell for his con.

That was harsh. Even after everything that had happened, Dallion couldn't deny that it was Nil who'd helped get where he was. If the old mage hadn't given him the library ring and the echo, it would have been unimaginably difficult to level up as fast as he had. Harp and the other guardians were a serious factor as well, but Nil had provided the initial push.

I'll still find him. Dallion forced himself to gulp down the glass, then took a small aether cube out of his pouch and placed it on the counter. Consider it a gift with interest, he said.

The innkeeper looked at the purple object for several seconds.

I suppose I can use it. She took it.

Do you have any free rooms?

I've kept your old room. Without breaking eye contact, she finished her entire glass in one go. No visitors. Everything is as you left it. I made sure.

That's very kind of you, but I don't think I'll stay more than a day.

I think you should. Might give you a chance to think properly.

There's nothing you don't know, is there? Dallion cracked a smile.

Can't afford not to. Plus, the overseer told me you've entered the city domain. Didn't take much to know where you'd go.

So, you have some sort of arrangement with the overseer, don't you? Dallion thought. By all probability, she had an arrangement with Countess Priscord as well. That was as impressive as it was dangerous. Dallion concentrated, attempting to peek into a memory fragment of Hannah's. Unfortunately, to no result.

You'll have free food and drink while you're here. The innkeeper stood up. See the sights, finish your business, and get out.

I thought you'd be glad to see me.

I'm glad that you're alive. Now, piss off. That was as much an admission Dallion would ever get. In this case, he wasn't even sure it was genuine.

Am I allowed to pass through the kitchen? he mockingly asked.

There was a momentary pause. It was almost as if Hannah hadn't considered such a response. Over ten seconds, she stood there, looking at him, then finally nodded.

Go ahead, she said. He could use a break.

As Dallion put back the chair to its place, he improved it, turning it into mahogany. Anywhere else, this would have served as a warning. Here, he still wanted to impress her. The grunt that came from her suggested he had failed.

That's a woman who knows what she wants, the armadil shield said. And it isn't you.

I'd forgotten how talkative you used to be, Dallion replied, making his way to the kitchen.

I have large shoes to fill. Plus, there's something nostalgic about going back to the place you found me.

The inside of the kitchen was astonishingly bland. Given that mages tended to cover everything with layers of spells and symbols, Dallion expected a decoration or two here or there. Instead, he found that the cook hadn't made any modifications, not even on himself.

Cooking eggs at the oven, the man was as average as could be. His appearance guaranteed that he wouldn't be noticed in a crowd. Upon seeing Dallion, though, his form changed, becoming a copy of the otherworlder. Most fascinating of all, there still weren't any magic runes visible on his being, just the bright glow of inner magic. Witnessing its brightness made Dallion swallow. While not as pure as the Moonstone, the cook's magic level had to be well over a hundred, possibly even a hundred and fifty.

Feeling alright, Dal? the cook asked.

There were many ways Dallion could have responded. However, all he could do was look in awe at the creature. The two had fought a few years ago, resulting in Dallion's victory. However, seeing what he could see now, Dallion had no inkling of how he had achieved it. Based on what he was seeing, he shouldn't have even come close. He had known the man was, in fact, a member of the copyette race and, at one time, an emperor who had tried to conquer the entire world, but he had never imagined what level of power that was. Could it be that Emperor Tamin was just as powerful?

You're not using magic, Dallion managed to reply.

The shapeshifting? The copy Dallion split in two, each becoming a Dallion wearing a different colored shirt. It's not magic. Well, not entirely. I'm using muscles, or my equivalent of them.

The cook tossed the omelet he was cooking.

Take a seat. I'm just about done with your snack.

Thanks, Pan. Dallion glanced at the table, yet didn't move.

On the go it is. The cook laughed. I take it you're a mage now?

Apprentice, Dallion clarified.

Not a bad start. That's the thing about magic; it's full of exceptions. Unlike the other skills, the more you do, the faster you improve. You'll be a full mage soon enough, and then the interesting stuff will begin. He tossed the omelet again. Before you ask, I can't teach you any spells.

I know. I'm not here for that, Dallion lied.

He had hoped he could learn a thing or two from the copyette. Unfortunately, seeing how different Pan's magic was, there was no way he'd be able to match it. All the copyettes Dallion had fought lately in the awakening realms had used modern type magic. The way they had created the symbols was different, but the overall principle could be copied with a bit of imagination. Pan was old-school casting spells as entire threads. If anything, his sort of magic was closer to potion making.

Where can I find Di?

Straight to the point. One of the fake Dallions sliced a loaf of bread in two, while the other tossed the omelet to him. It didn't seem like the most elegant sandwich one could imagine, but it wasn't fully done yet. Why do you think she isn't here?

One of Pan's forms sliced the omelet sandwich to pieces while the other focused on making a salad.

Hannah knew you'd come for the kid ever since you joined the Academy, the cook continued. Personally, I support your idea. If you don't take her there, someone else would, and that would only make things worse for everyone. You know Hannah, though.

It's not her decision.

Oh? You'll find out that it is. You brought the kid here to be safe. Taking her off to fight battles against battle-hardened enemies doesn't fall in that category.

The sandwich slices were placed on a platter and garnish with a rich salad composed of mushrooms, celery, cabbage, and spicy turnip. The smell alone made Dallion's mouth water. Clearly, Pan hadn't lost his touch.

I still want to talk to her, Dallion didn't give up. Is she in the city?

The Academy must have made you stupid. Pan's tone changed. Where would she go outside of the city?

Where would Adzorg go?

Is that your worry? Adzorg didn't even know she had magic.

Adzorg knows a lot, including everything Hannah does. If she knew, she would have told him.

Well, you can rest assured, she hasn't. The goal was protecting the kid. Going out with Adzorg is more dangerous than going with you, especially with him changing sides.

You really know everything, Dallion thought.

Officially, no one was supposed to know about Adzorg's involvement, least of all the southern provinces. The focus there had been the internal conflict and ensuring that each settlement believed that it was on the winning side. It could be argued that the Azure Federation had made sure to

spread news of the Academys split as quickly as possible, but nowhere was Adzorgs name mentioned.

Tell her I need to talk to her.

I just told you that I dont know where she is.

You did. Dallion cast a quick spell, causing the food platter to float towards him. Just one more thing. What do you know about Moon curses?

Pan smirked. Unlike Dallion, he hadnt been cursed with a temporary measure. The entire copyette race had been banished to the realms for what they did when conquering the world. Many of the old races suffered such a fate. What made the copyettes special was that they had at least one member who had managed to break free.

Curses are like trials, Pan said, as the fake Dallions merged into one. Theres always a way out. You just dont get any hints.

You still managed.

After trying for a hundred of your lifespans. Besides, even I got help.

Help?

In theory, the Order might be able to help you. I suspect that isnt an option, or youd have gone to them already. Another option is to perform a Moon boon. Theres no guarantee that will cure you, but at least youll earn yourself a hint and maybe a reprieve.

Who said Im the ones got it? Dallion narrowed his eyes.

Its obvious if you know where to look.

Chills went down Dallions spine. If Pan could see it, had anyone else?

No artifacts that could help?

Not from my time. The cook shook his head. Maybe the nymphs had something, but I doubt it. Their focus was magic. Ironically, the Star might have known. If youre lucky, maybe you can find yourself a high-ranking cultist to ask? There havent been many of those since you killed the last Star, but theyre still out there.

A cultist hunt? Somehow Dallion didnt consider that a good idea. As Nil would say one thing at a time.

Still, since you came all the way here, let me give you a piece of advice youre free to completely ignore. Try to level up. I think youll learn a lot.

Youre the second person whos told me that.

Its your decision.

Why? What will I see?

That would be telling. Pan winked.

Of course it would. Dallion sighed internally.

PERSONAL AWAKENING

Chapter 748: The Leveling Barrier

All of Dallions personal echoes were waiting for him in his realm. Two of them Gen and July had blotches of concern within their bodies. Ariel, in contrast, had nothing but determination and even slight annoyance. Having the highest echo of all, he was of the opinion that Dallion should constantly keep on persisting until he gained the skills to move on.

Weve been urging you for years and a chat with pan gets you to finally do it? Ariel crossed his arms. Seems they were right that magic limits people.

Dallion wasnt in the mood to argue, but even he was thinking about it. His current standing within the Academy had given him access to many of their resources, including their librariesnot the Learning Hall sections that all the novices got to see, not even the hidden sections within them. Dallion was allowed access to the archmage depository. Reserved exclusively for archmages and their immediate circle, it contained all controversial writings and historical descriptions that werent flattering to the empire or even the Order of the Seven Moons. More importantly, though, it contained the greatest known collection of old age scrolls. As the most junior member of the Shimmering Circle, Dallion had extremely limited access, but even so, he had glimpsed a thing or two regarding the empathy and magic traits. The general consensus among scholars, past and present, was that both traits could be regarded as polar opposites. Empathy relied on othersor the use of others, according to the more cynical scholarswhile magic regarded them as noise that had to be ignored. Was that what Dallion had turned into? It was difficult to say. He valued Harp and even Vihrogons opinions, but it was undeniable that Pan had effectively made the decision for him.

Magic is just a tool, Dallion said. He had tried to teach his echoes spellcasting, but without the actual trait that did them little good. We all agree that having a mage echo would be useful.

We already have mages here. Nothing will

Do your best, Gen interrupted. Just dont push yourself too much.

Beside him, July nodded. Only Ariel looked away, arms still crossed. The white-haired echo had always been something of a loner, but he cared as much about the realm as anyone else.

Dont worry. Dallion cast a spell, causing him to rise up in the air. I no longer do that, he lied.

It still felt slightly weird flying through the use of magic rather than with Lux. It was more cumbersome and less efficientnot to mention that it made Dallions firebird sadbut was a good way to get some free practice. After all, Dallion didnt have the means to call Lux in the real world.

Three doors remained within the realm, each leading to a trial more difficult than Dallion could handle. It didnt matter which he chose, so he went to the nearest, located midway up the mountain. A small Roman-style structure was erected there with 1 of 3 carved on the capstone just above the double stone door.

At least use the proper numerals, Dallion said beneath his breath. Gen had always had a particular sense of humor. Lately it had been showing more and more in the realm modifications hed made.

Youre in the halls of destiny.

Defeat your hidden fears and shape your future!

The familiar blue rectangle emerged at the start of the tone tunnel.

Dallion gave it a long look, then walked right through it. As he did, the rectangle shattered to glowing dust, then faded away.

Still levitating an inch from the ground, he summoned his harpsisword, armadil shield, and Nox dagger. Until he knew more about the trial, these would do.

The tunnel continued for another hundred feet, then took a turn to the left. Even before crossing it, Dallion could sense the aroma of fresh plants and flowers, as if he were in a meadow at the start of spring. Surely enough, fifty feet after the turn, he was there.

The room presented to him had the appearance of a wide valley surrounded by mountains with snow-covered peaks. Large meadows were in every direction, abundant with fragrant flowers and the occasional cluster of trees. That was not all, though. Dallions magic vision let him see buildings as well. Created entirely of solid purple neon, a five-story tower glowed a few miles away. It was a close copy of the Leaning Tower of Pizza back on Earth only straight and not as high.

Just great. Dallion cast a protective bubble around him. This was why he wasnt inclined to persist with his trials. He was going to fight mages again. Happy, shield? Dallion asked, while slowly floated in the direction of the tower.

There was a time when youd ask me that. A familiar voice sounded in his head.

A figure emerged from the bottom floor of the tower. It was dressed in a glowing purple robe, complete with all symbols of the Academy. The face belonged to Nil, however.

Keeping a calm exterior, Dallion flew forward, stopping fifty feet from the tower. This distance was more than enough for them to see and hear each other. Anything closer was risky when it came to spellcasting.

Ceremonial archmage outfit? Nil asked, admiring his clothes. Im quite flattered you have such a high opinion of me, dear boy. The way youve been hunting me down, Id have thought Id be wearing rags, like a proper fugitive scoundrel.

I should have guessed it would be you, Dallion cast a spell on the armadil shield. The item moved off his left arm, floating nearby just within the confines of the protective sphere.

Well, I have become your greatest fear, havent I? The old echo didnt seem particularly worried, not bothering to cast a single spell.

One of them.

The most immediate one, it seems. To be honest, Im surprised. Id have thought that the Azuge Federation would be higher on the list. If youd focused as much on them as on me, you might have won this war.

Ha.

Well, alright. I was just being nice. Still, given the role of the new mage legion, Id have fought theyd do a lot more. But I guess it takes time to teach a pampered sod to fight. Being a mage was always associated with comfort. Sure, some were more comfortable than others, but mages never fell so low as to actually fight. Not in person, anyway.

While Nil was talking, Dallion considered attack strategies. In his mind, the former archmage had the ability to cast any sort of spell. The only thing he wasn't good at was combat splitting. That was one of the things Dallion had confirmed after all the time at the Academy: with the exception of magic, mages were hilariously bad at anything else.

Going for the brute force approach, I see? Nil let out a slight sigh. I would have thought you'd opt for something a bit more sophisticated.

Anything that gives me an advantage. You're the one who said that.

I guess that's true. The echo paused. Well, what are you waiting for? You're not considering you could reason with me, are you? Not after everything that's happened.

Maybe I'll just ask Harp to finish you off. You know she can do that.

True or not, you believe it, so I'm stuck with it. Unfortunately for you, guardians cannot complete trials for their owners. Not when you're Moon-cursed in any event.

Dallion burst into a hundred instances. All of them surrounded Nil, maintaining their distance, then cast every combat spell Dallion was capable of making. Rays of energy, aether projectiles, and even reality distorting spells poured upon Nil from everywhere.

Normally, a mage would react by casting protective barriers, going on the offensive, or simply evading the incoming attacks. Nil didn't do either. He simply remained where he was, patiently waiting for the spells to pass through.

Not backing down, Dallion went on for a second round, then a third, a fourth. The results were the same.

Impressive, Nil said, looking at the destruction on the patch of ground surrounding him. Or it would have been if you had executed the spells adequately. Sloppy technique leads to sloppy results. I see you're following the Katka school of spellcasting: fast and sloppy all the way. Keep in mind that such an approach only works until it doesn't.

There was no point in continuing. Dallion let all his extra instances fade away. As they did, the spell effects also vanished.

No counterattack? he asked, pondering his next move.

You know the drill: it's not my goal to defeat you, it's you who must defeat me.

And before that, I must find the proper question of the trial, Dallion added.

See? You're not completely hopeless after all. Only took you a hundred levels.

I'm seventy-seven. Dallion frowned.

With a magic of twenty-three.

Nil snapped his fingers. The sun above the trial area exploded like a large firecracker, bringing for an instant night. That was the magic of legendmagic that a true archmage was capable of.

You know you can't defeat me, Nil said. True or false, it's in your mind and as long as you believe it, it'll hold true.

Dallion wanted to say it wouldn't be the first time he had defeated someone he perceived to be stronger. In this case, though, he could force himself to say it.

Yes, that's the issue of gaining magic. You might think you're better off by being so close to the big eighty. The truth is, it's all the more difficult. You've learned too much. That's why you've been so slow hunting me.

I'll get faster.

No, you won't. Nil pointed at him. And you want to know why? Because you're still terrified that I might turn out far stronger than you and your pretend battle mages can deal with.

A single Moon emerged in the sky, the Purple Moon. In its light, the aether tower seemed taller than before.

You really want to find me, probably more than anything else. Nil smiled. Not because Alien told you, not even because of the war. The thing you want is answers. At the same time, you're terrified that I might give them to you.

That's the trial echo speaking. Dallion dismissed the notion. If that was my fear, you would have attacked by now, showing me that I didn't have what it takes to bring you down.

The grass in the fields rustled as both looked at each other, not saying a word. Finally, after a full minute, Nil started clapping.

Quite astute observation, the echo said. You're right. That's not your greatest fear right now. Of course, that doesn't mean you've solved the trial. Still, the Moons have decided to give you a chance.

That'll be the day, Dallion thought.

And since you opened the door for exceptions until you complete this trial, you'll have no other, Nil continued. No matter which entrance you pick, you'll still end up here. In fact, all the doors of your realm are simultaneously connected to this valley.

I guess Gen will be pissed.

Using humor to lighten the mood? No, you're using music to boost yourself. Wonderful thinking.

Nil ended his clapping with one final slam, causing all stars to disappear from the sky.

There's your trial, he pointed at the tower. It's similar to the vortexes that are about to appear in the real world.

Vortexes? The crimson fury had given them the location and approximate time of one, though that didn't mean there would be more.

Think of them as real-life sphere items, Nil ignored the question. Each floor will grant you access to the next. Like layers of an onion, you must peel through until you get to the heart and absorb it. And just like with onions, there will be a lot of pain and crying.

Dallion looked at the tower again.

Five floors. Does that mean I get five magic levels? he asked.

If it were real. Since this is a trial, you'll have to settle with one awakening level. Oh, and of course, your magic will decrease as a result.

There was that. The reason still eluded Dallion, but it was all but confirmed that increasing awakening levels decreased the value of one's magic trait.

Not there, dear boy, Nil said.

What? Dallion looked at the echo, confused.

You're looking at the entrance. With this type of vortex, you start from above.

Chapter 749:

Tower vortexes. Dallion had read a bit on the topic. Like everything else related to magic, it made just enough sense for a person to get a general idea, though not enough to convince anyone it could exist. Increasing his magic trait to twenty definitely helped. Since then, Dallion was able to see the descriptions that came with magic constructs, spells, even the magic threads themselves. A vast number of the instructions required higher levels, but even twenty was enough to see some basic principles: when portals would open and close, what trigger events were in place, even the purity of specific magic strands.

The roof of the tower seemed completely solid. A novice wouldn't be able to spot an opening of any sort. Most apprentices wouldn't either, unless they boosted their perception through a spell or item. Thankfully, Dallion had a pretty high perception trait to begin with.

One thread among the millions that composed the top of the tower was different. Markedly darker, it indicated the area in which the tower was at its weakest. With enough skill and persistence, a mage could find the corresponding spell and form an opening. In the case of Dallion, he simply used a spark attack with his harpsisword.

Still a vandal, Nil said in a disapproving tone as he floated above.

Would you have preferred I use the thread splitter? Dallion grumbled. He was constantly keeping a few spare instances in case the echo did anything threatening. For the most part, though, he was merely annoyed.

That's not the point, dear boy. There are better ways than forcing your way into a vortex.

Dallion didn't respond, although personally he disagreed. Spark wasn't something mages were generally capable of. One could go even as far and say that was the natural counter a mid-level awakened had against mages. As far as he was concerned, it was just another tool. Maybe not as elegant as Nil would have liked it to be, but a single spark slice saved hours of testing and spellcasting.

A crack emerged on the tower's surface. The harpsisword still inside, Dallion extended his own magic through the weapon, using the tip of the blade to draw a portal spell. It was a lot trickier than usual, but he had the practice.

With the portal complete, Dallion created a second one with his left hand above the tower. A thin thread emerged, connecting both. According to the Academy scholars, the thread stitched both portals together, making them no different as a single doorway as far as reality was concerned. In

practice, Dallion didnt even care. Pulling out the harpsisword, he stepped through the portal, ending up on the towers top floor.

The surroundings were exactly what he expected from a vortex, but there was no way they wouldnt be.

The real things not that different, Nil said, appearing a step away. The whole point of the vortex cage training is to prepare mages for real life.

Will you keep floating around all the time? Dallion asked. This was starting to feel too much like the time in the prison realm.

Look whos talking. The echo smirked.

There didnt seem to be any creatures, which meant that this was going to be more like a riddle vortex. Still, Dallion didnt let his guard down. A dozen of his instances constantly moved about in every direction, helping him map the area, while three kept an eye on Nil.

It was huge. If it wasnt for the floor, ceiling, as well as the occasional wall, one could think this was the outside, or at the very least, an area realm.

On first glance, there didnt seem to be any flaws within the threads of the structure. Everything was perfection itself. Just to make certain, Dallion touched the floor with an echo of his.

MINOR WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 5%

A red rectangle emerged. A zap of purple lightning followed moments later.

Nasty, Dallion thought.

Not only was the effect unexpected, but it affected him through his instances. That meant that using echoes would be more appropriate in the current situation.

Bending down, all the while careful not to touch a magic thread, Dallion tried to see if there were any legible instructions. There didnt seem to be, but he suspected that was primarily due to his low magic level.

To end the suspense, the spells are in the threads, Nil said. Good instincts, but you dont have the level yet.

At least as far as the trial is concerned.

Think what you will, but the real thing is a lot more difficult than this. Youve had first-hand experiences, you should know.

Indeed, Dallion had some experience with a lower-level vortex. At the time, he had managed to brute force it without issue. That was the reason the approach wouldnt work here.

You arent going to call Lux? Nil arched a brow.

Five percent is fine, Dallion stood back up. No need to put him at risk.

Paranoid as a mage. Theres definitely hope for you yet.

Exploring the fifth floor of the tower took close to half an hour. The area was vast, and the walls were clustered semi-randomly. At first, Dallion thought that he'd have to solve a maze, but soon it became apparent that there was a pattern to the chaos. The walls were, in fact, static barriers. Increasing in frequency towards the center, they were protecting the center of the floor. The thing that threw Dallion off was that the space changed, transforming a square room into a round area. Once he got through that, it was easy to find the exact spot that marked the center.

Shield, have you ever seen anything similar?

Nope. Why do you ask?

It reminds me of the towers in the fallen south.

I'll take your word for it, the shield said.

Harp, what about you?

The harp's word guardian didn't respond. No doubt that was another taboo topic for her. It was always possible that such things didn't exist in the past. There hadn't been any hints of it in the memory fragments Dallion had visited. Then again, he hadn't seen any vortexes there either.

If you're trying to make me feel bad, keep in mind that I'm only an echo, Nil grumbled a few steps away from Dallion.

I know. That's why I'm not. One of Dallion's instances charged at the echo, making an attempt to slice him in two. The blade crashed against an aether barrier which, unlike most of the ones before, didn't give in. There's no way for me to know you're telling the truth. Dallion chose another instance to become reality, then split again.

That's a bit harsh. Although, you're right to be cautious. All I can share is that a lot of magic achievements were made by analyzing vortexes. The method to stretch space beyond its constraints, for one thing. Maybe you could learn a thing or two as well once you deal with the real thing.

I've already dealt with the real thing. Dallion continued walking around the inner wall of the room. There were two entrances, but for the moment, he chose not to cross them. Given how innocent and nonlethal the tower seemed, so far there was bound to be a stronger protection spell of some sort.

Only to a degree. I'd suggest that you read up more on the matter, dear boy. Stop with your current obsessions and focus on what's really important.

That's convenient. Dallion stopped. He had found another opening leading to the central area.

It all seemed a bit too tidy. Three openings all leading to the same central spot. Was this a metaphor for something?

So, you're telling me to forget about you and Di and just go back to the Academy to prepare for the vortex?

Leaning in, Dallion focused on the threshold. Some of the threads were glowing in a different intensity. He could almost see the instructions, but they were impossible to make out clearly. Summoning his thread splitter, Dallion used an instance to charge the weapon with spark and toss it through the room. As expected, a wall of energy appeared, only to have the thread splitter dagger create a hole as it flew through. A few seconds later, he did the experiment again to identical results.

A repeatable electrified barrier

, he thought. Not bad, but still somewhat underwhelming. If this was a high-level vortex, there had to be something else.

Shield, roll up, Dallion said.

The armadil shield, faithfully floating beside him, extended, then rolled up into a sphere. Once that was done, Dallion gently pushed it towards the wall opening.

The moment the tip of the shield was about to cross, the barrier appeared, this time blocking the object.

Does it hurt? Dallion asked.

Not particularly, the guardian replied. Alright, it doesnt hurt at all. Please dont do that in the wild. Im still healing the scars you gave me last time.

When? Dallion asked, concerned. You said you were fine at the vortex.

Not the vortex. Everything that happened during the time of your chaotic-youthful phase.

Dallion unsummoned the shield. No sooner had he done so, than Nil floated past, entering the central area. As if in mockery, the tower didnt react to the intrusion.

With an internal sigh, Dallion drew his harpsisword again and used the same method that had gotten him into the tower. It was neither elegant nor imaginative, but it got the job done. The moment there were two portals on either side of the opening, Dallion had an instance of him pass through. When nothing happened in response, that instance became reality.

Now the hard part, Dallion thought. If a simple portal bypass had helped him so far, it wasnt going to in the future. The floor in that section of the room was a lot more solid than the rest. The magic threads were thinner, but also more numerous, all glowing in flawless purple. Even a spark infused thread splitter wasnt capable of creating a hole.

Dont, Nil said, arms crossed in a disapproving expression.

Dont what? Dallion asked.

I know what youre thinking and

In a split-second Dallion let go of the thread splitter, summoned his harpsisword, infused it with spark, then performed a point attack straight down. Hundreds of magic threads snapped, causing a crack on the previously flawless surface. Another point attack later and the cracks became a hole leading to the floor below.

Dont do that? Dallion asked, glancing at Nil with an instance.

Just because you have some skill is no reason for you to get arrogant, dear boy, Nil grumbled.

It worked, didnt it? Dallion asked. Besides, you told me that all mages are arrogant.

All world conquerors were awakened. Does that mean that all awakened are world conquerors?

An interesting take for another day. Dallion burst into instances again and had them pour onto the fourth floor. The moment he did, they were attacked by an equally large swarm of fox-like creatures.

VORTEX MINION

Species: VIXENAIR

Class: MAGIC

Health: 50%

Traits:

- **BODY 20**
- **MIND 20**
- **REACTION 50**
- **PERCEPTION 20**
- **MAGIC 20**

Skills:

- **ATTACK**
- **ATHLETICS**
- **SPELLCRAFT**
- **SUBLIMATION (Species Unique)**

Weakness: UNKNOWN

You must be kidding me! Gritting his teeth, Dallion performed multiple line attacks with his instances, but to limited effect. The vixenairs were way too fast to let themselves be affected by the line of destruction. Working as a group, the minions combined magic with attacks, pushing all of Dallions instances out of the floor. Even worse, they didnt stop there, leaping up to where Dallion was.

Instantly Dallion cast a barrier spell, patching the hold, but even he knew that was a temporary measure.

Thats why you shouldnt rely on brute force, Nil said. Sometimes a barrier isnt there to keep you out, but something else in.

Thanks for the advice, o wise one. Dallion snapped back. He was expecting some underhanded trick, but definitely not this. And since he had only bypassed the protective spells leading him to the center of the room, he couldnt run out of the small encirclement, either.

Chapter 750: A Wall of Pain

The aether barrier shattered under the effect of a dozen spells. Dallion, however, was prepared. A few seconds were enough for him to create four additional echoes. Thus, when the vixenairs burst

onto the floor, a multitude of spells were cast their way. Chains and aether projectiles poured down like hail, followed by an expanding fireball. A flash of light flickered as the last spell hit the room below. Sadly, that only gave Dallion a brief reprieve. Thanks to his high perception, he could hear the creatures scurrying below.

Ready? he turned around with his back to the hole and leaped backwards. All four echoes did the same. When Dallion landed on the floor below, he was no longer alone there was a squad of him.

The layout of the second floor was very different from expected. There were no real corridors, just one giant space filled with vixenairs.

Oh, crap! Dallion thought.

Spells filled the air coming from all sides. Half of Dallions echoes focused on casting barriers, while the rest proceeded with combat spells.

It was tempting to say that he had improved a lot since his last encounter with the creature, but so had the vixenairs. Plus, there were scores of them now. As far as Dallion could tell, they were charging in from the sides of the room. Splitting into instances, he attempted a series of point attacks on the floor in the hopes they'd go straight down to the next. The attack was successful, but Dallion chose not to take that path. If he could barely deal with the creatures here, things would only get worse below.

There had to be a question a riddle that would help him clear the floor. Force and skills were universal answers, but he felt that something a bit more specific was needed.

We go for the corner, Dallion thought, his mind changing several times in the process.

Which corner? all echoes asked in unison.

Gritting his teeth, Dallion took a step forward. That corner!

Slowly, the group of fire marched in the given direction. The floor minions kept on engaging with their attacks, charging from different sides. Feeling the intensity grow, Dallion moved faster.

Just run! One of the echoes shouted, casting aether projectiles left and right.

Blindly dashing on would be a sign of desperation, as Nil would say. Then again, the echo wasn't here right now, and it didn't seem that Dallion had much of a choice.

Clearing his mind, he sprinted forward. Combining athletic and acrobatic skills, his echoes followed, not stopping their spellcasting for a moment.

Breaking out of formation for a few moments, Dallion did a series of line attacks to scatter the minions. The result was better than expected, but at the expense of his rear. The skulk of vixenairs had finally managed to overwhelm one of his echoes, causing it to poof out of existence. The remaining three quickly closed ranks, but it was clear they were at a disadvantage and the gap between them and the minions was growing. One less echo meant fewer combat spells, which in turn ensured that the number of minions reaching them would grow.

Right now, Dallions only hope was that the room had some equivalent of spawning points and that destroying them would severely decrease the flow of enemies.

How long till we reach the corner? an echo asked.

Stop attacking! Dallion shouted. Focus on barriers!

The group spring as fast as they could. At this speed, it was likely going to take them less than a minute to reach their target. Ten seconds later, they arrived. Much to Dallions horror, there was nothing there.

What the heck? He stared at the empty space. There had to be something there! Dozens of vixenairs had been charging at him from that direction. Where had they all vanished?

Backs against the wall! one of the echoes shouted.

That was the only advantage theyd gained so far. Or had they? Dallion split into dozens of instances, keeping an eye on the walls and ceiling. It was possible that the vixenairs came out of the wall threads. Thankfully, that didnt appear to be the case.

Was it this hard to clear a tower vortex? Dallion had barely reached his second floor and already was having serious problems. He could potentially call his familiars, but hed only be putting them in danger. Nox didnt do well with magic, Gem was too weak, and Lux didnt have efficient combat capabilities against the current enemies. That pretty much left one sole option.

Maintain the barriers! Dallion started casting his water portal spell.

Seriously? One of the echoes protested.

It worked before!

Flooding a magic realm was the equivalent of a cheat, but Dallion had to admit that it was scarily efficient. Due to the floors size, it was going to take a while to get everything submerged, but it was worth it.

The instant the portal formed, water burst out, throwing two vixenairs back. Aware of Dallions plan, the rest doubled their efforts, but it was already challenging.

All of Dallions echoes rose from the floor a result of flight spells. None of them wished to be in contact with the water. Many of the vixenairs followed suit, only to get showered by hundreds of aether projectiles.

What was that?! Dallion thought.

Improvisation, one of the echoes replied.

That was a bit reckless even for his echo, but it gave Dallion an idea. Doing nothing was going to end in failure, so he risked casting another water portal. There was a moment before the second portal emerged that Dallion considered whether he wouldnt be crossing any magic streams. Thankfully, nothing catastrophic happened, allowing him to continue with a third.

Waves of lightning bolts slammed into the groups barriers, shattering them one after the other. The echoes did their best to cast new ones, but they were soon overwhelmed. Two of them were zapped out of existence, while the last one, along with Dallion, dashed in different directions, avoiding the attack.

Running, Dallion gritted his teeth. The hunter part of him was disappointed he wasn't able to deal with a pack of minions. There was no denying that he had gained a bit of information; if Nil was to be believed, the trial would remain the same, allowing him to practice any future approach. After so much time without leveling up, though, he really wanted to reach seventy-eight.

Keeping to the outer wall, Dallion cast even more portals as he ran. Every few seconds, one more source of water would emerge, making the flooding of the floor faster. The vixenairs had noticed as well, for all of them had also resorted to flight spells. The fight had transformed into aerial mage combat, with both sides casting spells from a distance. One thing was clearly noticeable: as the water level rose, the number of minions diminished. There was no longer any trace of the vast groups that had charged him upon entering the floor.

Last Man Standing

(+2 Body)

You faced an army and the army lost. Pity this is only a trial. It would have been a lot more impressive in the real world.

Dallion blinked. That didn't make any sense. He could understand if the echo had been defeated, but that didn't mean that

He looked around. There were no minions to be seen. It was as if they had spontaneously vanished from the floor, leaving him along with a dozen active water portals.

Not the way it was supposed to happen, Nil emerged, keeping his distance from the water. But a win's a win, I guess.

Splitting into instances, Dallion explored the nearby area. Nothing changed.

I know it's not exactly part of the trial, but I'd suggest paying more attention to your enemies, especially since they're only copying your tricks, you know.

Care to elaborate? Dallion decreased his speed, cautiously floating in the direction of the room's center.

There were only four minions on the floor, Nil sighed. Once you slammed a hole in the floor above, they cast a multiplication spell on each other, filling this whole place with copies of themselves.

Quite a clever trick. Dallion felt ashamed he hadn't thought of that possibility, especially since he had used it a few times himself.

Four? Dallion asked, still not entirely convinced.

Four. Nil nodded. Felt a lot more, didn't it? You shouldn't count that only you can use out of the box thinking. At the very least, your opponents are likely to copy your tricks and even improve them.

Always hide your skills, Dallion quoted the advice he'd received so often.

Always hide your spells. Well, in your case, it doesn't matter. You haven't made any original spells yet. When you do, be sure to add a lot of fake symbols and connections to prevent copying.

Ill keep that in mind.

Two towers gone, three to go. Aware of the rapidly increasing water, Dallion quickly flew back to the center of the room. Given what hed gone through so far, the challenge on the next floor was going to be a lot more intense. It was very possible that a horde of platypains was expecting him there. Even so, he had one main advantage.

Gripping his harpsisword tightly, Dallion performed a series of point attacks directly below. The force of the first moved all the water aside, creating a circle of dryness, along with a few minor cracks on the floor; the following three smashed through, causing the entire section to collapse. Dallion split into instances, ready for anything that might jump out. A split second later, something did.

ENTANGLED

You are unable to walk or run for the next five minutes, or until the void tendrils are removed.

PERMANENT EFFECT - PAIN

Your ENTIRE BODY has been wounded and will continue to inflict pain until the status is removed.

The status continues to be in effect in the real world.

The combination of shock and pain was so great that it not only thrust Dallion out of the trial, but his realm as well. Leaping back, he crashed into the kitchen door, stumbling on the floor along with a platter of food. His entire skin hurt as if it were on fire. Even with a body trait as high as his, Dallion could barely tolerate it.

Lux, he managed to whisper.

Stay still. Pan rushed to help. The cooks hand changed form, reverting to its natural state.

Dallion felt it wrap itself around his neck, then move back, pulling something off him, like a gardener removing a weed from the ground. Strings of black threads were visible in the copyettes tentacle, making Dallion feel as if his flesh was being torn off.

Almost done, Pan persisted, grabbing the strands with his other hand for one final tug.

The pain increased, then vanished.

Crap! he whispered. A dozen more appropriate phrases had come to mind, but Dallion had managed not to use them. There was no point in getting in more trouble with the Moons.

Stay there a bit. Pans hand regained its human form. The black threads kept on wrangling in his fingers, before crumbling to fine dust. Thats a lot of pain you got. He looked at Dallion.

It wasnt the first time Dallion had experienced pain or even permanent effects, but never before had it been so intense. Waiting for a few seconds for the echoes of the sensation to pass, he then stood up.

The price of trying to improve, Dallion said.

It shouldnt be. Win or fail, it shouldnt have been anywhere near Unless you have a pretty bad curse, he added silently with his expression.

I was just out of practice, Dallion lied. Trials get tougher when you have magic.

I know. Ive been through that.

Yeah, well, Im only human. Dallion turned around. Ill go rest a bit. Its been a long trip, and this didnt help much.

Sure. Ill cook you something fresh for later.

Thanks. Dallion grabbed hold of the kitchen doors handle. Ill still find them, you know, he added, backs till turned. Even without your help.

Dal, in the state youre in, Im not sure I can be of any help. How long has this been going on?

First time. Technically, that was true. It was the first time the curse had manifested during an awakening trial. It wont happen again for a while.

Dallion left the room.