

Leveling up 611

Chapter 611: Hollow Mountain

The surface of the sea rippled rhythmically, distorting the reflection of the seven Moons in the sky. It was morning, and yet all of them were clearly visible, watching down upon Dallions realm.

Theyve been there for a week now, Dallion said from the top of Harps tower. I guess they cant wait for me to return to the real world.

The Moons are always watching, the nymph replied as she played on her harp of water.

Do you think I should go? Dallion asked.

He had improved quite a bit, although there was still something to be desired. A few more months of training was certain to be of help. He could practice on his skill combinations, maybe learn some new types of attackseven if that was unlikely, considering his current gear. Maybe he could attempt another trial. The main issue remained food. The pain and fatigue had long vanished, but thirst and hunger kept on growing, to the point it was getting difficult keeping them at bay with mind tricks. According to Nil, reaching a mind trail value of eighty would be enough to do away with all such notions. True or not, Dallion was too far away from that goal to care.

Yes. Came the reply.

Blobs of emotion appeared throughout her, letting Dallion know that it wasnt an easy decision for her. Unfortunately, his music vision only went so farit gave the emotions of a person, though not what stood behind them.

See you after. Dallion turned around and leapt off the tower.

The firebird instantly appeared, enveloping Dallion and granting him wings of blue flames.

Get me somewhere even, Dallion said. To reduce the shock of returning to the real world, it was beneficial to get a running start. Gleam, good luck.

You believe in luck too much, the shardfly replied. Worry about yourself.

The moment Dallions feet touched the ground, he dashed forward. A dozen seconds later, he was back to the real world. The shift caused a momentary wobble, causing him to swerve slightly.

Go! he heard Gleam shout in his awakening realm.

The sound of steel shattering steel boomed above. With one of his instances, Dallion looked up to see what was going on. There was no sign of the enemy shardfly, but his whip blade was falling to the ground at great speed. Looking closely, Dallion could see the cord holding the blade fragments cut in two. Parts of the weapon flew down, as if struck by an invisible force. Unfortunately, he had no time to linger. All but one of Dallions instances vanished, replaced by a hundred new ones, most of which were sprinting at full speed towards the tunnel heading into the canyon cliffs.

Gripping his harpsisword tightly, Dallion struck the ground, just enough to cause the weapon to vibrate.

The subsequent strike didnt occur until ten seconds later, less that fifty feet from the tunnel just as Dallion had expected it would. Similar to the echos attacks during the trial, it distorted the sounds created by the harpsisword, allowing Dallion to determine its direction. Unlike the trial, though, it was a lot stronger.

Dallion managed to turn around and block it using both harpsisword and shield. Even then, a dozen of his instances were pushed back with tremendous force. Seven instances were crushed beneath the weight of the attack, bones shattering as they were driven into the ground. Most of the rest were scattered like bowling pins.

Lux, boost me!

Bley flames emerged from the dartblade as it propelled Dallion forward. All but one of the instances faded away. The sudden acceleration proved enough to confuse the shardfly. A series of attacks followed, yet all of them hit the ground moments after Dallion had already flown through. Once he entered the tunnel, it was all over. Finally, he was safe.

Stop! He said in his realm, unable to voice the words with his mouth. Gleam, how are you?

There was no answer.

Things dont look good, Genone of Dallions caretaker echoessaid. The bridge is split in three and theres no sign of her.

Are the parts still standing? Dallion asked.

Looks like.

That gave him some hope. If the bridge hadnt crumbled completely, it meant that the link to the item was still in effect, which meant the item was considered whole to a degree. Once hed done what he had come for, Dallion could go back, retrieve the whip blade, and mend it. Just in case, he ordered Lux to try to heal as much as possible of the bridge, using his healing flames. With luck, there wasnt going to be any need for him until Dallion reached the top of the mountain.

Hitting the tracks with the tip of his blade, Dallion kept on walking. Several hundred feet in, the light from the tunnel had all but disappeared, leaving him in darkness. Sound was the only means through which Dallion could see in the immediate area around him. It wasnt exactly echo-location, but combining it with his other senses, it would let him know if anything hostile attacked. As for traps, holes, and other obstacles, Dallion reverted back to splitting into a dozen instances.

Fortunately for him, the trip was uneventful. Other than a few insect nests, there wasnt anything remotely dangerous in the tunnel. Only the weakest creatures in the entire southern canyon had sought to hide here, and were by no means eager to fight someone as strong as Dallion. All of them without exception, scurried away as soon as he approached. From here on, the only enemy was time.

Are you sure youre going the right way, dear boy? Nil asked. Youve passed by several tunnels so far.

I thought echoes werent the type to use magic to peek into the real world.

I've done no such thing! The old echo grumbled. I'm no more aware of your surroundings than you are. And I know for a fact that you have kept on going along a straight line for half a day now.

Half a day? Dallion had lost track of time. Somehow it seemed a lot less, as if it had only been an hour since his encounter with the spectral shardfly. In truth, he was still holding hope that Gleam would emerge in his realm any moment now and curse at him in her typical fashion.

People come and go, Nil began. Echoes and guardians are no different.

She's fine. The bridge is still there.

The bridge is part of your realm. You don't even know if the link to the whip blade is still in effect.

Let's not talk about that now

I'm trying to help you, dear boy. Having this weight down on you could be detrimental when you meet the aetherbird. You're an empath, so you know how transient life is, especially for items. There is no doubt that Gleam will be missed. I was rather fond of the creature myself, but unless you're a Moon, there's no denying reality. She is gone.

Dallion quickened his pace. Deep down he was fully aware of the possibility, just as Gleam herself was. The familiar knew she was no match for a shardfly of that level, and had still gone to her own slaughter all for the sake of Dallion. A few years ago, Dallion would have called it unfair. After being a hunter for a yearcenturies, if he counted the time he spent in the awakened realmshe accepted it as part of life. Even so, he still wasn't willing to fully accept that Gleam was gone.

For several more hours, he kept on walking until he felt his strength diminishing to the point that he had to stop. The lack of food, and the constant pressure he had subjected himself to, had brought Dallion to the breaking point. At one point, he just stopped, lying on the tracks, his back against the wall of the tunnel, and went to sleep. Lux and Ruby were left on guard. Out of habit, Dallion had almost asked Gleam to keep an eye on the forward part of the tunnel.

The nap felt brief, despite it lasting for nine hours. Dallion stretched, checked when Gleam had appeared in his realm, then continued along the tunnel without having a sip of water. Lux and Ruby followed.

After several more hours, the shape of the tunnel changed. It was only at this point that Dallion allowed Lux to light up so he could get a better look at his surroundings.

The section he found himself in was significantly larger than expected, full of multiple tracks, and for the first time train carts. They seemed very different from what Dallion remembered from Earth, as if someone had tried to recreate the vehicles from memory, but had made certain aesthetic and technological compromises. The best way to describe them was large wagons with metal wheels.

The whole area looked like a train depot. In the distant past, dozens of trains must have come and gone through here. Curious, Dallion went upon one. Other than the design there was nothing unusual: large seats, large windows, and empty spaces where the doors were supposed to be. Whoever had built them, apparently didn't consider doors being a vital part of the wagon. There was

no telling what the power source was, though Dallion suspected it had to be a form of magic, similar to the light crystals. None of the trains he examined had any engines, suggesting that the large bulky metal objects attached beneath the wheels must have provided energy. Whatever the case, it was for another time. Right now, Dallion had to make his way to the foot of the mountain, then climb it.

Almost remarkable, Nil said as Dallion jumped off the wagon he was on.

Almost?

Everything the Star has provided is almost remarkable. From advice to technology. That's why it's so risky coming here. A lot of the Academy's major mishaps came from people using artifacts they didn't know anything about. The rest came from people who knew exactly what they were doing with them.

Mages like blowing things up, Dallion said cynically. What else is new?

Usually, the point is to try and avoid getting themselves blown up. So, where to now?

From what I remember of the map, there's a stairway up leading to the surface. From there we walk to the mountain. Should take us a day or two to reach the top.

More than enough time if you still want to go through this.

Not this again Dallion sighed.

I'm not planning to persuade you otherwise. I know you're too stubborn for that. I won't stop telling you that you've got a choice. Once you reach the peak, there might be no turning back.

There never is.

It took a while for Dallion to find the stairway leading up. While the map he had seen in his dream was accurate, it didn't account for the debris clogging the space. On several occasions, he had to use point attacks to clear his way, at times collapsing flights of stairs as a result. Thankfully, his current level of athletic and acrobatic skills allowed him safely to jump his way to a stable section and continue the ascent.

The further Dallion went, the worse things became. On several occasions, Nox mentioned he felt the presence of cracklings, only to be ignored. Dallion was in no mood for pointless skirmishes. The floors ranged in the hundreds, suggesting that this section of the city had risen to the sky. For some reason, it made Dallion think of the Tower of Babel. He never regarded himself as religious, but he knew the stories revolving around it. There was no telling whether he was right. For all he knew, the entire structure could have been built underground. The punishment it suffered, though, was equally disastrous.

Hours of climbing later, Dallion finally saw what he was aiming for: a star-filled sky. Not a single moon was present, making the constellations all the more visible. There was a more remarkable aspect to the view. Until now, Dallion had assumed that the mountain was beyond the city's remains. As it turned out, the city remains were the mountain itself. The tall rock exterior covered hundreds of floors, which even now rose to the heavens. All that was left now was to reach the top.

Chapter 612: Aether Equinox

It was one thing to say that the south must have been a major city. Seeing it was something completely different. It was already morning by the time Dallion reached the top of the mountain.

that made it impossible for him to see the aetherbird. However, he managed to see something else. The spot was a perfect vantage point to look over a large part of the canyon. From this vantage point he could see the markings of the massive crater, but that was not all. His scholar skill allowed him to envisage that which had long been destroyed. Hills became massive buildings connected by subway lines that spread out in all directions. What crime had they done or rather, what crime had the Star made them do for such a marvel of the ancient world to have been utterly destroyed and all memory of it erased from the world? Dallion had his suspicions; however the Moons weren't known for their sharing native, and all the people who did know were forbidden from talking about it.

Dallion caught himself wondering what it must have been like. Modern technology coupled with infinite power. There was little the Star-touched couldn't do. There already were trains, land and air vehicles would have followed, and why not rockets? Could it be that it had caused the destruction of the Star's kingdom? The attempt to colonize a Moon, killing it in the process? A similar attempt would have been seen as an attack later on, to the point that by the age of Dryads, everyone was convinced that the Star had killed a Moon. Later, even those stories vanished into oblivion. That was how myths were born, later becoming superstition. Of course, the truth might have been a lot more trivial. It was always possible that the Star indeed wanted to take over the world.

What a waste, Dallion said.

Whatever the reason for the catastrophe, it had left a crater or ruins, visited only by mercenaries scavenging the edges of the domain. No people, no guardians, only monsters and Star-spawn.

Nil, do you think there's anything close to what this has been?

Dallion had seen two cities of what was believed to be a less significant province. Even the ruins on which Nerosal had been built were infinitely times more impressive than anything that existed in the world at present. That, too, must have paled in comparison to this place.

Probably not, the old echo replied.

Is that why you don't like coming here?

There are many reasons, but yes, that's one of them. It goes to show there's no telling when it would occur again. There was a time when I too was curious, searching for secrets of the past. Not the trinkets that get peddled in Nerosal, but artifacts of real power. It's said that everything created by the Star was destroyed. However, that's not always the case. There are parts, materials, blueprints as long as one has the strength to look.

Did you come here?

Nil didn't reply.

Did you find anything?

That's the thing about you otherworlders. You always ask what was found, while you should be asking what was lost. Hopefully, that's a lesson you've now learned.

The atypical spitefulness in the echo's response made Dallion stop with his questions. The sad thing was that the echo was right on both accounts. Ever since arriving here, Dallion craved for adventure. Like his grandfather, he wasn't content with what he had. He could have easily remained

in his village upon defeating the village chief. He could even have been the one to level it up to town status. Instead, he'd gone to Nerosal. That too had proved too small to contain him. The urge of exploration was always inside, practically forcing him to swap the city for the wilderness. Now, the wilderness no longer felt enough. Dallion wanted to learn about the world's past, the hidden history that had been removed from minds and records. Also, he felt that he didn't want to receive orders from nobles anymore.

Dallion looked at his backpack. He'd have ditched it long ago if it wasn't for the guardians of the items he carried. If Gleam were still here, he might have done just that, ordering her to carry his belongings back to Nerosal. There was no doubt that a whole brew of trouble was brewing back there. The way things were escalating, he wouldn't be shocked if the province was in the middle of an all-out civil war. If anything, he was surprised that no mercenaries had ventured in the fallen south after him. Maybe the Star had made sure to keep him safe. On the other hand, it hadn't done anything to prevent the spectral shardfly from doing what it did.

I'll get some sleep, Dallion said, making his way to the inside of the mountain. Ruby, keep an eye out, but don't show yourself. I don't want to lose you.

The shardfly flew off his shoulder. It was taking the death of Gleam far worse than Dallion. Being a creature of little words, the difference wasn't immediately apparent. Thanks to his music skills, however, Dallion could feel the heart wrenching sadness constantly emanating from Ruby.

A small cave tunnel led to the series of rooms beneath the summit. They gave the impression of being a large penthouse. There was no furniture or any objects whatsoever. Similar to the towers Dallion had seen in the neighboring region of the south, they had probably been created by void matter and fizzled off, or been scooped up by some star-spawn or other. There didn't seem to be any cutlings or even cracklings anywhere near, as if they had been confined to the canyon itself, but not the mountain.

The hours dragged on. Despite Dallion's many attempts to fall asleep, the most he achieved were a few half-hour naps. Each time he'd wake up hoping that it was evening, only to find the sun shining brightly in the sky. At one point, he even did a few practice fights in the room, slicing through walls and floor with the new combat trick he'd learned. Not too long ago, point and line attacks were the most destructive moves he'd considered. Even then, he wouldn't use them indiscriminately. Now, he couldn't see himself fighting with anything less. He'd even asked Harp if it would be efficient when doing line attacks while the harpsisword was vibrating. The answer was no, of course. The new method was only a close range effect, although the nymph guardian had hinted that upon improving his music skill further, he could do a lot more devastation.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the sun reached the horizon. Ruby was the one that told Dallion about the sunset, making him to go back out again. Before he did, Dallion checked the artifact the general had given him. Supposedly, it had the power to lower the Stars level to his own claim that remained to be proven.

There's no point in being tense, Nil said. Having a clear mind is preferable regardless of anything else.

Dallion didn't reply. For the first time in a while, he was feeling eager. After fearing and running from this moment for so long, he finally wanted to have it over with.

Theres no indication that the Star will show up.

Youre probably right, Dallion lied. There was no doubt that the Star wanted the phoenix. Some restriction must have been placed on Arthurows by the Moons, preventing him from capturing the bird outright. If not, hed have done so already. Then again, it wouldnt be the first time the Star had lied about something.

A single pale Moon became visible in the skythe Purple Moon.

Guess thats one thing you didnt lie about, Dallion thought. All that remained was to wait for the next part to be true.

The blink of the eye later, the Moon was right above Dallion, triple its usual size.

Im asleep, Dallion said. The only time hed seen something of the sort happen was in dreams. The Green Moon was particularly fond of presenting himself in such fashion.

All that power and you dont know how to use it, a familiar voice sounded behind Dallion. Instinctively, he burst into instances, drawing his weapon in several of them.

No sooner had he done so, that he found all of them gone. The weapon was still on his back, leaving him standing there, looking at a purple bird not too far away.

Youre using forced splitting, Dallion said.

Took you enough hints to figure that out.

The aetherbird gave the impression of smirking, even if it was incapable of physically doing so. Looking at it, the creature was very different from what Dallion expected. Barely the size of a sparrow, it had the slightly prolonged neck of Lux. Its plumageentirely composed of purple flameshined, glowed, and flickered simultaneously, making Dallion doubt that it was even real.

I didnt know you can force split, Dallion took a cautious step forward. To his surprise, the atherbird didnt bother moving. Possibly it considered the probability of capture too low to care.

Im the embodiment of magic. What did you expect? The phoenix flew up, then flew onto Dallions shoulder right over Ruby.

The shardfly reacted as expected, fluttering away in panic. As far as reality was concerned, it had flown through the air. And yet, the aetherbird was also there.

Youre different from what I expected.

Just because of our encounter before?

Encounter before? Dallion asked.

In that mage village. You made quite the impression at the time. Mostly because you were the first person actually able to talk to me in centuries. Youve no idea how boring life of a Moon familiar can get. All the boredom, though only part of the security.

Youre your own echo?

Im magic. Magic is full of exceptions and paradoxes. I thought youd grasped that by now. I cant die, yet I live. When Im defeated, I can delay the effect pretty much for as long as I like. There was a slight pause. Alright, thats an exaggeration. You still get the picture.

Dallion attempted to pat the creature. His hand passed right through it until he reached his own shoulder. It was almost like trying to grab smoke or a flame.

You know why Im here, right? he asked.

I doubt even you know why youre here. The aetherbird chirped in laughter. Given that you dont want to catch me. And in the grand scope of things, it doesnt matter. The last bunch that captured me thought theyd change things for themselves and others. How did that work out? They definitely changed things, but none of them got what they wanted.

I want someone not to capture you.

Oh? Thats new.

The Star wants you. Dallion paused. Was it wise to share that? The Moons already knew, which likely meant that the familiar did.

There you go again. And to think youre considered the new kid on the field. Its true what they say the chase is better than the catch. You think all this hasnt happened before? Look around, what does this tell you?

Dallions heart skipped a beat. This was something he hadnt thought about. It was true that everyone who knew the worlds past was forbidden from sharing that knowledge, the same didnt apply to the aetherbird. Being magic, the creature was the living exception, not to mention a Moons familiar. It could tell everything he wanted to know and more.

Eager, Dallion attempted to split into instances. Sadly, each time he tried, the instances would fade away almost as soon as they appeared. The phoenix was forcing one reality and one alone.

Just give up. You dont have the level.

So that means when I reach level eighty, Ill be able to?

Ha! Itll have to be a bit higher than that. And the way youre doing itll take you decades to get there. Thats one of the things I cant figure out about you. Youve got all that power, and you use half of it to suppress the other half.

What do you mean?

Forget the Star, you fear so many people in this world that its not even funny. Youve got three of the rare skills and a ridiculously high level, and you know how to use them. But do you? Most of the time youre trying to find a way to actively avoid them and when you actually use them, its for gossiping.

The comment hit a certain nerve. It was easy to say that Dallion had subconsciously kept himself from going all out, but the truth was, he was doing it consciously.

Time to change the rules, Dallion thought.

A purple rectangle appeared.

Chapter 613: Aether's Story - Erekol's Creation

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Erekol, Second Age

Existence came in a flash. Aether didnt know how or why. All he knew was that time had been split in two branches: up to the point he could move and after that. All of it seemed boring, and for some reason there didnt seem any particular difference between the two.

Aether, a voice commanded. It was a soft and polite voice, though not kind.

Aether knew that it belonged to GalateaThe Purple Moon of magic. He also knew that the Moon was his creator. There were several of them in total, definitely more than one. For some reason, though, he couldnt remember anything about the rest of them, only all that his Moon had done.

Youre making me wait, the Moon said.

The tone was neutral, deprived of any emotion whatsoever. It was, though, filled with magic, passing through walls and air alike. Aether could see the threads and symbols flow through it, making it vibrate in the air.

Galatea was a solitary Moon. He preferred to be on his own and not interact with anything. Long ago, in the far past, he had made a point to distance himself from all natural laws just so as not to be reminded of the others presence. Possibly, that was why Aether couldnt remember any of them. It was a strange realization that hed known all along.

Stretching his wings, Aether took a few shaky steps, then flew up and right through what appeared to be the wall of a very high building. The confusing part came later, when he went through the building walking about there.

People werent a new addition, although the current ones were a rather recent development. Most had been born not too long before Aether himself. There was magic in all of them, coursing through them like fine threads. In the special ones, the threads were thicker.

After a few seconds of fascination, Aether quickly lost interest in shifting form to a creature with a much larger wingspan as he continued the flight to his creator. The distance was short for everyone who followed the physical rules. Aether, on the other hand, have flown miles in and out of reality all the time following an aether path that ended on the Moons shoulder. Upon reaching it, the bird flapped its wings vigorously, coming for a complete stop, then slowly descended the last few inches. It wasnt something that was supposed to be done, but Aether found it amusing.

You werent supposed to have a personality, Galatea said. He had taken the form of a tall man with long, straight hair falling to his waist. The clothes were a combination of robes and trousers that had gone out of fashion two centuries ago, but they fit him well. Everything was shades of purple, of course, in regard to clothes. The Moons skin and hair color, on the other hand, changed incessantly, going through all conceivable and inconceivable shades.

Dont you mean he should have had all of them? someone else.

Aether had no idea who that was, but he knew it was another Moon. He also knew that he was someone capable of talking to him, even without the use of magic.

The second Moon was dressed all in green, though following no fashion whatsoever. Despite that, Aether felt the combination suited him.

Its a nice gift, the Green Moon continued. Even you have to admit.

Only an idiot would think that.

There was no telling who they were talking about. Aether definitely didnt remember his creation being a gift from someone. Everything he knew told him that the Purple Moon had created him, but at the same time, he knew that wasnt entirely true. There was someone else involved as well.

I want to explore the city, Aether said.

The comment made both Moons look at the bird. The only beings who could interrupt a Moon were Moons. Aether was an exception or rather, he was one of the exceptions. There was too much freedom within his very being that even they couldnt control.

Reality splintered into a thousand possible outcomes, each a grain of said within the rest. In each, things were slightly different. The bird was curious how those differences would develop, but barely had they started to branch, when Galatea condensed all of them back into one.

Dont do that, he said, neither angry nor disappointed. Go, do as you wish. Just come back when I call you.

Sure thing. The bird flapped its wings and flew through the building wall. He knew he had created a bad impression, and he didnt care. There were too many things to explore. As someone who knew nearly all the past, it was the present that he found exciting.

Aethers size grew as he moved further and further up into the sky. After half a minute, he was as large as a tenth of the city over which he observed, and it was a giant city. People could well spend weeks walking from one side of the city to the other. Building clusters the size of mountains were placed between fields and forests, connected by massive roads that drilled through hills and went over lakes. But most of all, there was magicmillions of threads going through, above, and under the city like an enormous cloud of yarn. It provided the city and its inhabitants everything they might need and so much more. Over three quarters of the entire world lived in this one place alone, and even the rest had gone through it at least a few times in their lives.

It hadnt always been like this. The city had been created not too long ago. In fact, it had been created the very same instant Aether had, yet at the same time, it had always existed. That particular notion confused the bird slightly. Not that there were two conflicting realities that was normal for magicbut rather that he didnt know anything about the city itself. Aether had no clue how it had been built, by whom, which sections were the oldest. It was as if the city just came into existence.

A trio of mages approached from a distance, flying just up to the birds giant eyes.

If you keep that up, youll blow out the sun, one of them said. He wasnt anything special, but he was magic, and that made Aether at least listen.

Get lost. The bird flapped its wings, transforming into a cloud of mist.

For several moments, he watched with glee as one of the mages flew about, startled and confused. The mind of the unfortunate human was still struggling to comprehend what was going on. Fear had

taken over, causing him to see what was not there a nasty trick Aether had played. Unfortunately, the remaining two ruined his fun, quickly drawing a spell pattern that returned the human to a stable state.

That's no fun, Aether thought.

If you want to explore the city, we'll gladly assist, the first mage said.

Did Galatea tell you to keep an eye on me? Aether grumbled. He hadn't experienced the question to disturb him so much. It felt as if someone was trying to condense him into a drop of water, then lock him away in a flask.

No. The architect thought you might be curious.

The architect. The name sounded familiar, although Aether had no idea what that was. Curiosity and a deep sense of calm made him return to the size of a swallow. Following one of the magic lines, the bird flew up to the mage. He was human, perfectly ordinary, bordering dull. Of course, most humans were like that. The Purple Moon didn't like them, since they were both insignificant and resourceful.

How do you know? Aether asked. Where is he?

No one knows where he went. A sad smile formed on the mage's face. He had the appearance of a twenty-year-old, but the aether within him showed that he was supposed to be a hundred years older. He vanished once he created the city. I'd like to think that he went home, but I think that he'd just had enough of it all. Erekol was his crowning achievement. As were you?

Me? Aether flapped his wings. Why me?

You were his gift to the Purple Moon an eternal companion by his side. He told you that you'd be born with all the knowledge of the past and not an inkling of the present.

Aether was about to say that he didn't remember anything of the sort, but found that would only prove his point. Life after his creation was confusing. The one that had been before was a lot more structured, with few questions and even less unexplained events. Then in the present and he had already encountered so many things he didn't know about.

And you'll tell me about him?

Yes, as much as I can.

Why? Aether almost snapped, as if catching the mage in a lie.

Because that's what he asked me to do.

From this point on, the conversation quickly shifted. Aether stopped inquiring about the reasons and just went along with the flow. And the mage, on his part, gave him answers to many things that remained hidden.

The city of Erekol had been built by a man called Chacle Sering. The mage claimed that he had been human, although Aether had his doubts. Surely it had to be a Moon. No one else had the power to vanish memories, not from the creature that represented the embodiment of magic, at least. As for Chacle, he had created the overall composition of the city as well as every structure within it. There

were a total of eight major city sections, divided in two groups of four. Each section was built in honor of a Moon. The central mountain buildings were dedicated to the Purple Moon, and by extension Aether himself. The mage explained that the architect had considered placing a nest on top just to mark the perfect spot for the bird. He had changed his mind, however, preferring just to make the building cluster appealing and leave Aether to choose whether to perch on it or within it.

The other sections were a lot more boring. The physical appearance differed, but beneath the near complete lack of magic threads was obvious no matter how they looked. Only here and there Aether would spot pockets of condensed magic areas occupied by mages, of course.

That was another thing that annoyed the bird; the inhabitants of each section were a completely different race. Humans were the only exception, with two sections filled with them, although even the mage failed to explain why. The excuse given was that since the architect himself was human; he had granted a larger section of the city to his favorite race.

That didn't make much sense. Space wasn't the issue. There were vast uninhabited areas in Erekol. Clearing a forest section to add another building cluster would have been enough to solve overpopulation for the next few hundred years, and yet two sectors had been given to the humans two rather smaller sectors.

Mage, Aether began, perched within the wall of the mages bedroom. Why do you look so young? You should be a lot older than you are.

That's because I am, the mage laughed. One last gift the architect gave me before disappearing. Or a joke. He did have a strange sense of humor.

Why didn't he give it to everyone?

He gave it to many, but even he has his limits. At least that's what I prefer to believe. Granting youth to some while ignoring others doesn't sound like the man he was.

Does that make him the greatest person in the world?

There are those who won't agree with you. The majority will, though, so that's why the eighth sector honors him, even if that wasn't his intention.

It's not like he could complain, Aether said, then stretched his wings.

You never know with the architect. He might just as well appear from nowhere, say he changed his mind, and take the city away.

Won't people be upset with him if he did so?

Precisely. The mage smiled widely

Chapter 614: Aether's Story - Exodus Start

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Erekol, Second Age

The funeral was tiny, given the size of the Erekol. There was no monument or tomb, just a marker the size of a brick. Less than a hundred people came to say their last farewells, mostly mages. Even with two lives, Klere Eilia never bothered to make a family, dedicating his entire life to his craft. Aether didn't consider the man particularly good at it, but he still admired his persistence, and the

stories he told. In a way, the mage had been one of the few sources of unknown information, telling him about events outside of the birds memory. There was no way to verify it, which was slightly annoying. Aether had seen all too often how people humans and dryads especially lied. Even so, it was better than nothing, and he had enjoyed the mages company.

You could have given him his name, Aethers new companion said. She was relatively young somewhere in her thirties universally considered a prodigy. The truth was that her vast magical abilities were as much a gift from the bird as they were the result of hard work.

Aether had noticed the girl at birth. The strength of the magic flowing through her was faint, though noticeable enough to attract attention. Normally infants, even copyettes, had the barest amount of magic at birth. Most had it poured into them during the time of awakening. The usual occurrence had made Aether become close to the child, to the point that his old friend Klere had become her teacher and mentor. Maybe as a sign of respect, she had taken on a human appearance, sharing part of his appearance while walking in the city. Aether found it a nice touch.

For me, hell always be the First Mage. Aether flapped his wings.

The first mage to speak to you, the copyette smirked.

If youre that snarky, why are you here?

The star pupil is asking for you again. Something to do with the new device thats being built.

The copyette wasnt even hiding her disdain. She wasnt the only, although one had to admit that with the new inventions the pupil brought had made life a lot more comfortable for a whole lot of people. At the same time, it had also caused a fair number of people to leave Erekol and form their own small settlements. The nymphs had been first. If there was one thing the city kingdom lacked, it was adequate oceans. Attempts had been made to remedy the situation by adding bigger and bigger lakes throughout it, but that had only made the situation worse. At present, almost as many nymphs lived outside of the city as did in it.

We shouldnt be calling it that, the copyette added. I cant imagine the level of arrogance needed to call yourself a star pupil of the architect without even meeting the man.

Im sure you have an inkling. Aether couldnt keep himself. His companion wasnt particularly known for her modesty. Lets have a fly.

Normally the copyette would comment on that being a waste of time. Her disdain for the star pupil, however, was so great that she readily agreed. In a matter of minutes, both of them were high above the city, not even visible as dots in the sky.

A century had done a lot to change Erekol. The astounding thing was that the vast majority of changes had occurred in the last decade. It was all driven by a handful of people, the star pupil among them. All of them were otherworlders and without exception, human. The world they came from was a lot different from this one, which made them interesting in the eyes of the Moons, though most of the other races found them disruptive. Already the roads between city clusters had been largely replaced by metal paths on which empty carriages flew at speeds greater than most animals. The star pupil had attempted to explain the concept to Aether a while back, but the world

wasnt at all interested. He had helped to create the spell pattern that propelled the carriages forward and left it with that.

Theyll be changing your roost soon, the copyette said.

I doubt theyll dare.

It has nothing to do with daring. The stars considering it a surprise gift. To make you and the people in the building more comfortable.

The explanation made full sense, and yet Aether didnt approve of the idea. He wasnt supposed to care. The Purple Moon had told him multiple times never to form attachments with individuals, but rather admire the overall flow. Of course, the Moon was a hypocrite. Like all the rest, he had his favorites, he observed. Ironically, the star pupil was one of them.

Ill tell them to stop, he said.

You better be ready to destroy the building. The star has already decided to lie to you and go ahead no matter what you say. Remember, its a surprise, the copyette moved her hands away from one another as she said the word, mocking the fashion in which the star pupil spoke. She even mentioned it to your Moon.

There goes one good spot, Aether thought.

If the First Mages grave marker wasnt so low, hed consider resting there. Of course, there was a chance that the new building didnt turn out awful. A lot of the introduced technology was rather nice. It filled the city with a lot more magic strands, and for a being like Aether, that was a huge plus. The way things were going, as long as a person had magic, they could have the city do anything they could imagine, from cooking to heavy construction. Even those completely lacking the train could enjoy a large part of the benefits, which was the reason why so many people admired the star, often comparing her to the architect himself. Aether had no memory of the man, but based on the stories hed heard, the comparison was laughable.

Are you envious? Aether asked.

Envious? Me? The copyette changed her appearance, matching that of the star pupil. Just because human otherworlders are born without any limitations, while the rest of us have to work for it? Why should I be envious?

There we go again. Aether promptly ignored her. One thing he never got used to was the complaints about things people couldnt control. As far as he was concerned, it was like a ravine complaining it wasnt as tall as a mountain. The Moon of Awakening was the humans patron, so it was natural that they would be granted a lot of benefits. The copyettes, for example, were the only race that could freely shapeshift and regarded that as perfectly natural, not to mention that they were vastly superior in spellcraft than all the rest.

Whats this new contraption they are building? Aether asked.

A flying box, the copyette replied.

A flying box? The bird looked at her.

Dont look at me. Thats how it was described. A flying box that would help anyone enjoy the sky just as much as furies. You could guess that didnt go too well with the cloud section of the city. Things have calmed down, but cracks are forming. In order for all to enjoy something, some will have to make a few sacrifices. I wouldnt be surprised if half the furies left Ekerol. Frankly, Im surprised they havent done so already.

You say that because youve never been out of it. Its boring out there. Ive been to a few of the nymph cities.

Personally, Aether considered them to be almost as bad as they had been before the creation of the city. Even with the knowledge and advances of Ekerol, the new settlements looked like beggar quarters. People had to hunt for their food, make their own clothes, often even fight for protection. There still were monsters out there; maybe not as many as there were before the age of Ekerol, but enough to make life somewhat risky.

The way things are going, I just might. After taking the skies, the star plans to find a way to grant everyone use magic.

Thats not so

But only magic she approves of.

Huh?

People will have a device that will be able to perform certain spells, even if the owner lacks the magic trait. The compromise is that it will also block any other type of spells even if one does have the trait. Itll become like the carts all over again.

That was another topic of contention. When the new wagons were introduced, they were supposed to make life better, and they did. However, it wasnt too long after that standard roads were closed off for long distances. The argument was that since it was going to take ridiculously long for a person to go from one place to another by foot, or even on horseback, having them would only put people at risk. Technically, a few roads between structure clusters still remained, but they were becoming less and less.

Galatea wont agree with that.

Just as Felygn wouldnt agree to objects without guardians?

Aether found that the question angered him. Unlike the copyette, or most people for that matter, he knew that the Moons had rules they had to follow. There werent many of them, but blatantly interfering in the lives of people was one of them at least on a major scale. Everyone had their followers they could help by making an exception or two.

How do you know so much about the star?

I put echoes in any object I could get my hands on. A few bricks as well. Since the geniuses were so much for making guardianless items, there was nothing to stop my echoes from keeping an eye. Most of them hate me for it, but they know whats at stake.

That was a surprise. This was the first time that shed mentioned using her echoes in such a fashion. There was nothing against it, but even so, there had to be something improper. People werent

supposed to put their echoes in things they didnt own. Being a mage, the copyette clearly took advantage of a loophole that wasnt supposed to exist. Funny how such things could be applied outside the world of magic.

Aether didnt bother to help with the star pupils latest contraption. Sadly, that didnt even slow things down. As the years went by, the city changed more and more, becoming more magnificent, allowing people to do things they had only dreamed about. Yet just as the city became more advanced, it also went through a phase that had been unheard of since its creation: it started to shrink.

On the surface, it seemed like the support for the star was increasing, though that was only because of all the people who left. A large part of the furies were next to go, followed by the gorgons and copyettes. To Aethers surprise, a lot of humans did so as well. It was the dwarves that mostly remained. Despite that, even they quickly were on the decline. Twenty years later, the majority of all eight city sections were inhabited mostly by humans, their numbers tripling. By then, there wasnt a single part of everyday life that hadnt been touched by the star pupil. More and more people would whisper that the star was equal to the architect and as such should hold more power than the Moons themselves. Meanwhile, the settlements outside Ekerol grew, becoming towns and cities in their own right. Ties with the glorious cities were severed, and once more the population of the world was fractured as it had been in the past.

Aether didnt find that new. He had memories ranging millennia before Ekerol was even created, long before the architect was born, back when the races existed in crude small settlements in a wilderness of nothing. Kingdoms had formed and dissolved many times. There was no reason this should be any different. The Purple Moon had told him never to get attacked, so Aether didnt. Yet, even so, he couldnt get rid of the grain of sadness that had appeared when his companion left the city as well.

Chapter 615: Aether's Story - Execution of a City

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Erekol, Second Age

The star pupil wants to see you, divine one, the man said, bowing so low that his head almost touched the ground.

Aether could feel a significant amount of magic within him, just as he felt the other thingthe coldness of the void. Lately, his roost was the only place in which it couldnt be felt. This was one of the inventions of the star pupil that disgusted him. Ever since its initial discovery a decade ago, the aetherbird had stayed as far away from it as possible. He had matured enough to know not to interfere with events in the city, even if he really wanted to. Normally, Aether wasnt one to care. The physical didnt affect him as much as it did the mortals. He was fine with the development of the cities. Of the new devices that brought in ease and chased away so many people. Even the new set of mega-buildings and monuments didnt bother him in the least. The void, however, was an entirely different matter.

The star pupil, of course, claimed that it was merely another different form of magic, and from what was demonstrated, no one could say any differently. Aether had asked the Moons on the topic, but they had refused to answer. That didnt stop them from spending more time in the sky than in Erekol itself. There was a time when theyd stay in the buildings the architect had created for them, even

walk about the streets among mortals. Those times were gone. Now they only appeared briefly within their temples, and even that was becoming rarer and rarer.

I dont feel like it, Aether replied.

The star pupil will very much like to discuss an important matter with you, divine one. The plans of the device are almost complete and your input is required to ensure that

I said, I dont feel like it. Aether remained calm, but his tone was as hard as ice.

He knew that the real reason the star wanted to see him was to discuss the prospect of gaining the title second architect. Apparently, a century effectively ruling over the city as the architects star pupil wasnt enough. In the past, that hadnt been a particular issue, but apparently not it was. The star was starting to lose patience.

Tell the star Ill come when I feel like it, the aetherbird spread its wings and flapped off into the sky. At least there he could have some calm.

Given everything that had happened since the dawn of time, he thought that it would take at least as long before he started to find the world annoying. Sadly, it had already started to happen. Erakol was getting wrapped with the unpleasant chill of the void, while the rest of the world remained exceedingly boring. Even the Purple Moon, who had insisted that things were certain to become interesting, was no longer pleased with the current developments. One of the reasons was the star being one of his followers.

As Aether flew, a piece of cloud peeled off, forming a condor-like entity.

Are you going to avoid me forever? the cloud-condor asked with a crackling voice. It didnt take a genius to guess what was the cause of this. Arent we friends anymore?

Not since you stopped using your name. Aether changed form, growing twice in size.

Id like to change that. The device Im working on is going to change everything you know. Itll change everything the world knows, Moons included.

Aether was getting annoyed. Why couldnt the star understand that Aether didnt have the power to make anyone the architect. In truth, even the Moons couldnt. It was all up to the people those with the strength and dedication to level up to the point that they could become one. In theory, there was nothing stopping the star from doing just that.

She was right about you, Aether thought. Part of him missed his companion the being he had been closest to since the first mage. The saddest part was that the copyette had glimpsed the truth of the star pupil decades before anyone else and no one had believed her, even the aetherbird.

I know Ill never be proclaimed the second architect, the cloud condor said. Ive given up on that. All I want to do is go back home. Its not just for me. Its for all the otherworlders as well as those who want to see what its like in my world.

Aether had no way of telling whether the stay was lying. Some people became so good in the art of deceit that even magic wasn't able to see through their disguise. It was possible that the star wanted to go to another world to be admired.

The best solution was to refuse to provide any help. That was what Aether had decided before flying off. Somehow, the conversation just now had changed his mind. There was no magic or music involved, just a common curiosity on his part, and the faint hope that once the star was gone, the void throughout the city would decrease.

A few days later, work on the grand device began. The construction of the device was both simple and complicated. The magic part was beautifully intricate and easily understandable. The technological part, on the other hand, was completely foreign to Aether. In a way, that was the point. The device, like many others created by the star, merged magic with technology from Earth. In more cases than not, the union of worlds created true marvels. There were cases in which, though, nightmares were created.

It took over a year for a test version of the device to be built. Its role was simple: just prove that something could be transported from one world to the other. When the grand day came, the entire city was there, watching. Magic infused light crystals covered all buildings, showing a picture of the star activating the device throughout the whole of Erekol. Even the Moons had gathered to mark the occasion.

All should have been well, and on the surface it was. Upon activation, the device managed to connect to the humans world for a matter of seconds. The time was enough for the star to snatch a single item from Earth and transport it back to the awakened world. The item was small, foreign, made of materials that no one had seen. The star described it as a tool, but Aether considered it a weapon: it had a sharp blade that could appear and disappear at will. That wasn't the greatest danger, though. Unseen to most, the device had created a significant side effect: a crack through which the void leaked through. It was different from the void already in the city. Violent, aggressive, with a mind of its own, it latched onto whatever already existed, transforming it into a monster.

If there was a time when the Moons had to get involved, it was now, but they didn't.

The void was smart. It didn't attack anyone in the city, even if it could have killed thousands. Instead, it quietly slithered out of the city. Since no one was harmed, the star's failure was overlooked. What was worse, the experiments continued. Each time the device was activated, more cracks formed in the world. Unseen by most, the land between settlements transformed into a wilderness, very much like it had been at the dawn of time. The number of monsters increased, breeding more monsters in turn. Yet, even that didn't stop the star's ambition.

Four years after the device was first activated, an event occurred that changed the world forever. Seeing the limitations of her original device, the star had gone further. It was no longer enough to create a contraption that would allow people glimpses of other worlds. The new plan was to create a permanent connection. To achieve this, the parts of the new machine itself were taken from the other world. Cracks kept on spilling into the world, but that didn't matter since it was all for the good of the grand machine. And when it was all but complete, the star requested an audience with the Moons at which the truth on the matter was revealed.

Blackmail? The Purple Moon asked, amused. You're blackmailing us?

Its not personal, patron, the star replied, not in the least bit phased. Youve made it clear that youll never give me what the architect had, so I decided to be a bit more convincing in the matter. Youve seen the side effects of my device. Even a few seconds are enough to have a void spill into your world. Of course, the area guardians are keeping it at bay, but thats temporary. If I start my latest device, the door wont be open for just a few seconds. A permanent connection would be established and while it lasts, void would flood the world.

Youll just destroy yourself, Aether said, perched on the Moons shoulder.

I doubt it. The star pulled off a glove, revealing a hand completely covered in blackness. I mastered the manipulation of the void long before I started work on my device. And Im not the only one. My supporters also have that power. If the world is overtaken by void, well be the ones left, not you.

For the first time since his existence, Aether felt chills pass through his entire body. How was the star so calmly discussing the destruction of the world?

I should never have helped! The aetherbird thought. If he had ignored the star pupil back at the time, all this wouldnt have happened. There would have been no void-magic, void-objects, or complex Earth-based technology. Everything would have remained the same as the architect had created it.

Of course, I dont want that, the star continued. This world is a magnificent place. Im not talking just about Erekol, but everything surrounding it as well. Just do as I ask, and Ill dismantle the device and erase the knowledge of it in everyones minds.

Is that all? The Red Moon smirked. You just want to become a deity?

Ive done enough to deserve it! Everything in Erekol is created by me! The architect might have been the one to build this city, but I recreated it ten times better! Without me, people would take weeks to cross the city, theyd have to work months to acquire a harvest, or wood for the night. I created an age of bliss and I want to continue driving it forward. All that I ask is that you allow me to

No, the voice of the Blue Moon thundered.

As he did, a ball of blue light hit the grand city, shattering it to pieces. An explosion filled the space between ground and sky, reducing all structures to dust. Blue fires covered the land, though they were quickly put out by a heavy rain that appeared, pouring down through the entire world.

Now you have no device to threaten us with. The only thing left of the city is this room, and it, too, will break up soon enough. The Blue Moon turned around and started walking away.

You killed an entire world? the star asked in disbelief.

No, the Blue Moon replied. We just destroyed the buildings of Erekol and all your inventions within it. The people will continue to live. Theyll have no memory of what happened. They wont even know how the city looked, or even that it had been. History will start from scratch. You wont live long enough to pick up the pieces back together again. But youre welcome to try. Watching you will be most interesting.

Barely had the Moon said that than the room itself was reduced to dust. Nothing but a wild world remained, a world full of members of the seven races, none of which knew where they were or what they were doing.

Chapter 616: Aether's Memory - End of the Beginning

MEMORY FRAGMENT

Worlds Middle, Copyettes Era

Aether flew across the sky, the suns rays turning purple as they passed through. He had been flying over an hour, following the threads of magic over the world. In the distance, the Purple Moon was making its way to the horizon. Unlike half the other Moons, Galatea preferred when the sky was there.

Aiming to reach his Moon, Aether cast a spell, halving the distance. After repeating the spell a dozen times, the aetherbird was close enough to perch on the Moons shoulder.

Theyve started rebuilding, Aether said.

Itll take them a while to gather all the pieces.

The Purple Moon clearly didnt care, even after everything that had happened. As far as he was concerned, the problem had been dealt with and the star made an example of. Of course, the pesky little details didnt bother him; details such as chunks of buildings surviving the destruction of Erekol. The Moons had made sure that even indestructible material was destroyed. However, magic always came with exceptions, and a very large part of the city was full of magic. Even crumbs left from the event were enough to set off the rebuilding process, especially since there were enough mages whose memory had remained intact. The star was one of them, and naturally, the Moons couldnt care less.

Theyll give up in a few centuries, The Moon added. Either that or calm down. And if they dont, well do this again.

That was the answer for everything: repeat something. Looking back into his memories, Aether could see many things repeated time after timeevents that occurred once in a millennium. For mortals, that was something that occurred once in ten lifetimes; for Moons and magical beings with long memories, it was something they had seen before.

You think shell try again? Aether asked.

Everything thats occurred is bound to be repeated, the Moon sighed. Its the sad truth of life.

Then there will be another Erakol?

No, thats something thatll remain unique. Theyll try to remake it, probably hundreds of times, and all theyll create is a pale shadow.

Youre terrible at fun.

Youll be as well. Just give it time.

That was a terrible thought, but Aether wasn't bothered. He already knew that his magic nature had granted him that exception. Unlike the Moons, everything seemed interesting, as if it happened for the first time.

Flying off the Moon, the bird descended back to the ground. There was so much that had changed, so much to see. As time went on, the changes increased.

Towns developed into cities, some even into kingdoms, but among all the chaos there were three groups who had the greatest advantage of all. After the destruction of Erekol, most of the people had forgotten a lot of their past knowledge. Some of those with high levels of the magic had allowed them to focus on rebuilding a lot faster than the rest. The nymphs were the race closest to magic; however, the copyettes had an extremely high memory trait. Both races had already progressed far faster than most of their competitors, although even they were second to the achievements of the stars group.

As the decades went on, two different approaches emerged. The cities of all races focused on subduing area guardians, carving their own bubbles of safety from an increasingly dangerous wilderness. The star, on the other hand, embraced the wilderness itself. All items and structures remained completely guardian-less, while void matter was amassed and shaped into whatever the inhabitants of the new kingdom wanted.

After another decade, Aether finally decided to return to something he found familiar the building which had served as his old perch.

The Star knew you'd be back, a large man with platinum white hair said as he appeared a few feet away from the aether bird. He had used magic to get to this point unnoticed, although he wasn't a mage. Clothes made of black void covered him from throat to toe. Just not when.

I don't like void, Aether said, still admiring the view. In the past, he could see a large part of Erekol from here. Now, all there was were a few half-built structures scattered about at random.

My apologies. The man took a step back. We tried to keep your building clean, but void has a mind of its own, even when not intelligent.

Ha!

It was obvious that the man was lying. He hadn't even attempted to hide it. Even with the void shielding his emotions, Aether knew why he had come here. There was only one thing that the star pupil wanted help in completing another device. Most likely, the same device that had caused the destruction of the city.

You still think there could be a second architect?

Of course, the man replied without a moment's hesitation. It's a lot easier now with the past destroyed. All the Star needs to do is rebuild what was lost. Then the Moons will have no choice in accepting the truth.

There it was the arrogance that Aether had come to expect. Clearly, erasing a whole city and the world's progress hadn't been enough to teach some people a lesson. The second attempt at glory had already begun. The star simply didn't know when to quit.

Naturally, we'll give you something for your assistance, the man said.

The suggestion felt insulting. There was nothing a normal could give to a moons familiar. Aether had the knowledge of all spells created in the far past, as well as many of the stars own devices.

The grave marker of the only person you admired.

The first mage? That was unfair, but it was also something he wanted. As the Purple Moon had said, even in an eternity of repetitions, there were a few unique things. A memento of the first person who had spoken to Aether was one of those things.

The Star has managed to find it and will gladly return it to you for some modest help. All you need to do is

Clever, arent you?

A purple rectangle appeared, bringing the memory to an abrupt end. It took tremendous force of will for Dallion not to leap back. Being ripped out of memories was ten times worse than being ejected from an awakened realm. Memories and questions stirred throughout his mind, trying to match up.

You knew the Star? Dallion managed to ask after a while.

I knew everything there was, the aetherbird replied. To a point. It became a bit difficult to keep track when the Moons started banishing races. What did you think youd get, by the way? The effort was amusing, but futile. I can erase every memory youve glimpsed. Maybe Ill go further back?

You wont, Dallion said as he attempted to pat the creature on the head. Same as before, his hand went through. Youre too bored for that.

Oh? Aether turned his head, to get a good look at Dallion. It wouldnt have been a bad thing, except he did what every bird would do turn his head sideways. Managed to find some backbone in my memories? Maybe thatll help you show some progress.

The way the bird said that suggested that Dallion wasnt the first to have been a focus of the Moons by a long shot. That was to be expected the Moons had their favorites, which given the amount of time passed had to be in the millions. The real question was, what were the Moons expecting from him? According to one of Dallions awakening trials, people were nothing more than entertainment for them, but somehow he felt there was more to the story. The answer was on the tip of his tongue and at the same time so far away.

Dont worry about the Star, the aetherbird said. Theres nothing he can do. And neither can you, for that matter. Dont worry, Ill give you enough feathers to impress your noble and whatnot. Youll be able to claim that you caught me, or enough of me.

This was your home, Dallion changed the subject. It was built for you.

The only remnant of a forgotten city. It was supposed to be destroyed twice, but I couldnt help myself. Galatea said Im too sentimental. Maybe I am, but I like unique things, especially those that belong to me.

Things werent making sense. If the phoenix was so powerful, how had he been captured? Actually, Dallion had a pretty good idea, although not why the Star wanted him? If the memory fragment was any indication, the Star was already a mage and a very powerful one at that. There was no reason for him to want to obtain a skill gem unless the Moons had taken the skills away from him. That too

didn't make sense, though. They hadn't bothered the first time the Star had acted up and clearly weren't bothered by the subsequent chaos he created in the world. For all intents and purposes, they didn't seem to care or didn't they?

What now? Dallion wondered. Before the memory, he had decided to go all out. After learning what he did, he was no longer sure. Should he meddle with forces far exceeding him?

No, Dallion whispered firmly.

No? the aetherbird asked. No, what?

No turning back.

Gleam hadn't sacrificed herself so he could quite halfway thought. There was no guarantee that what he was going to try would have an effect, but he intended to do it, anyway. The secrets of the past, however interesting, had no hold on him. Dallion was in the present, and planned to act accordingly. Without a second thought, Dallion split into instances. The effect was effortlessly negated by the aetherbird, but that wasn't of consequence. It was all meant to create a distraction lasting a fraction of a second long. During that time, Dallion grabbed the hidden artifact given to him by the general and pressed it against his chin. A flash of brown light blinded him.

PERSONAL AWAKENING REALM INVASION

The mountain Dallion was standing on vanished, replaced by a new one.

You are in the realm of AETHER

You are not supposed to be here!

The purple rectangle floated around Dallion. When he tried to instinctively wave it away, the rectangle moved back out of his reach. This was the realm of the aetherbird, alright, and it was not pleased.

Dallion looked around. The entire terrain beyond the mountain was in constant flux. Forests changed into trees, then into grass, before moving on to desert, and then sea again.

Lux, Dallion ordered.

The firebird enveloped him in its blue flames, lifting him off the ground. Surprisingly, the mountain didn't disappear or even change. For some reason, it remained the sole spot of stability in the entire realm. Possibly that had to do with its significance in Aethers life. The firebird clearly valued it to the point that it had allowed it to go against the creature's naturean exception against the exception.

What did you do? Aether asked.

Something I might regret, Dallion replied.

The purpose of the artifact he had used was to reduce the level of the Star to Dallion's own, in the event he got into another fight with him. Some might say that it was a gamble using it on the aetherbird, but Dallion was fairly certain that it would work, and indeed it had. He was just about to provide an explanation to Aether when someone interrupted him.

Well, a familiar voice said a short distance behind, sending chills down Dallions spine.

Summoning his harpsisword, he split into a dozen instances and turned around. As he did, he kicked the side of the blade, causing it to vibrate.

Dallions fears turned out to be founded. Less than twenty feet away stood the familiar figure of Arthurows, his Earthly clothes now having an inky black gleam.

Isnt this awkward? the Star asked.

Chapter 617: Aether's Realm

Dallion was the first to attack, striking at Arthurows with a double spin. The harpsiswords blade vibrated intensely, letting out a strong musical hum. It never hit its target though, blocked by the Stars arm. The black substance that composed his clothes had trickled up, covering his entire arm, acting as a diamond-like shield. Despite that, Dallions attack sliced through into it, even if merely a fraction of an inch. Apparently, a music infused harpsisword wasnt capable of fully cutting through the Star.

Interesting. The Star looked at his hand. Youre improved.

The Star took a step forward, but the moment he did, the mountain split it into two, forming a chasm between him and Dallion. It wasnt just a normal chasm eitherall the air had also been split, keeping Dallion at a distance even if he was floating.

Nice to see youre up to your old tricks, Aether, the Star said, looking up at the sky. A bit on the weak side, though. Anything wrong?

Youre a funny guy, the aetherbirds voice thundered. Still reaching for what you cant get?

I thought youd say that. Only this time, things have gone my way. Arthurows rose in the air, surrounded by black flames.

Dallion didnt need to ask Nil to know what was going on. Just as Dallion could make use of his familiars, the Star had the power to manipulate the void. If he wanted, he could probably release a swarm of cracklingsor even chainlingsto wreak havoc. Why hadnt he, though?

And its all thanks to Dal, the Star laughed. I knew hed bring me here eventually, but he did me one better. He weakened you enough so I could take you.

Arthurow seemed different from what Dallion had witnessed in the aetherbirds memories. There was nothing majestic about him at present. In the memory, he had been exceedingly powerful, having others do his bidding. In fact, Dallion hadnt seen him once in those times. Everything was done by subordinates which themselves commanded a greater authority than the being in the present day. Back then, the cultists were people who could actually think on their own, not the possessed puppets and lowlifes the current batches seemed to be. They were dangerous, troublesome, and powerful, but insignificant compared to what they were before. Tens of millennia ago they had virtually ruled the entire world, and now were reduced to a criminal sect constantly hiding from the nobles whose cities they infiltrated.

Keep on dreaming. Laughter filled the realm. Youre like a moth fighting a candle.

I like my chances. Not to mention that Im not alone this time.

Dallion froze for an instant. He knew making any deal with the Star was a perilous idea. History had proved it along with the races that had been banished into the awakened realms as a result. And still, a small part of him wondered what he could achieve if he could cast spells. He wouldn't be terribly good at it; this leveling up had slowed down as it was, but it would be enough to make certain people think twice. From what he had seen, even a weak mage remained a mage, maybe not enough to be accepted by the academy, but they were going to keep others from blatantly harming him. Dallion had seen that when facing the rogue mage. It was only due to the poison plague and Archduke Linatol's personal involvement that the mage's death was hushed away. Even then, there were repercussions for the Icepicker guild and March in particular.

How about it? the Star asked. Your device made everyone in this realm the same level. There's no winner in a three-way fight unless we work together.

I'll just fight against you.

That the Star waved a finger won't be as easy. Dear Aether tends not to trust people. Even if you vow not to go against him, he won't be convinced.

Looking at the ever-changing landscape around him, Dallion could believe that. The reason he had gotten to fight an echo of the aetherbird in the feather was because it had let him do so. With its real-self at stake, would it do the same?

But say you gain its trust. Are you sure you'll be able to take me on? The star continued. Magic is a wildcard when it comes to combat. It can only kill if it's stronger than the person it's used against. But will it counter my skills?

Blade-tipped tendrils emerged from the Star's clothes, extending outwards.

Remember the fight at Nerosal? You had someone else fight back then someone with real experience who'd almost taken over the world. Even with him, and the restrictions imposed on me, you won by sheer luck. I have no restrictions here.

It was difficult to deny that if it hadn't been for Aspan, Nerosal would have been swallowed by the wilderness.

I don't need the skill gem, Arthurows said. I just need to do something with it. You can have it afterwards. Even Aether knows it. If he didn't, he'll be going on all about it.

Lightning crackled, spreading throughout the entire sky like water trickling down glass.

Dallion tightened his grip round the harp's words hilt. This was like in his trial all over again. The difference was that there wouldn't be a Moon to help him out this time. No Moon would come to his rescue here, but that hadn't been the goal of the trial; it was to crush the Star's influence before it took hold.

Spark, Dallion whispered, splitting into instances. Lux, forward!

The blue flame wings on Dallion's back extended as the firebird thrust him in the direction of Arthurows. The blade of the harp's word tapped the side of his shoe, then started humming, accompanied by a white glow.

The Star must have sensed the danger, for one of the void tendrils changed form, transforming into a shotgun. Apparently, he really was able to form modern weapons, as Dallion suspected. At the same time, the result was a lot cruder than he thought. With a high enough perception, one could see the many flaws in the weapon. For starters, it was the most basic of models a generic two-barrel shotgun, if that. The surface was far from smooth, not to mention that the barrels seemed slightly crooked.

Shield, Dallion ordered. The shotgun might not have been perfect, at close range, it didn't particularly matter.

The armadil shield extended. Covering Dallion's entire side. At exactly the same moment, the Star darted towards him. The black flames didn't provide the speed of Lux, but the maneuverability was better.

A blast followed, scattering pellets of void matter in Dallion's direction. In several instances, the shield was hit and pierced, resulting in stacks of purple rectangles appearing. Provided with a series of pad options, Dallion fell back to his safety instance. The Star didn't stop there, continuing towards him, shotgun aimed forward.

Another six instances emerged, all heading in different directions. Maintaining them was far more difficult here. For every one that emerged, twenty would fade away. Dallion could feel his temples pulsing. The pain was becoming palpable, yet he pushed through.

One more shot and another five instances were pulverized. Not needing to reload, the star aimed at Dallion again. At this point, the distance was shortened to a few feet. The harpsisword split the air, hitting the middle of the shotgun barrel slicing through it like putty. Unfortunately, that didn't stop the blast.

MODERATE WOUND

Your health has been reduced by 20%

PERMANENT EFFECT - PAIN

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

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

MAJOR WOUND

VIHROGONs health has been reduced by 50%

Three effects with none issued in return? This was far from what anyone would hope for, though it had allowed Dallion to achieve a better position. Currently, he was banking on the Star, not being used to fighting on a level playing field. While he had a clear advantage at short range, hand to hand combat wasn't his thing. The last, and only, time Dallion had fought the Star one to one, Arthuro's had shown he was pretty bad at it. While it was true that Dallion had struggled to win, it wasn't because of the other's combat skills.

Taking advantage of the situation, Dallion immediately performed a spin attack, making a full three-sixty arc with his harpsisword. The weapon hit the size of the Star. Thanks to the effects of the Spark, it cut in deeply, halfway into the bone.

AGGRAVATED STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 100%

For a single moment, time froze. The Star looked at the wound, as if refusing to believe it possible. On the surface, there wasnt anything strange. Attacks were supposed to deal damage, though for some reason Arthurows tended to think that wasnt supposed to be the case. For a fraction of a second Dallion saw a grain of emotion flash in the Stars forehead. Hidden behind layers of void was fear, not fear of dying, or even failing, but a different type of fear mixed with agitation.

Without a moments delay, Dallion pulled the harpsisword out, then swung for another attack. Void matter poured out of the Star as if he were a balloon that just had burst. The liquid attempted to surround Dallion, but Luxs flame stopped it inches away from his body. Not wishing to take the chance. Dallion hit the blade of the harpsisword in his shield, then struck at the surrounding blackness. A single slash was enough to tear it down like an old curtain. The liquid fell a few feet down, then retreated back to Arthurows. As for the Star himself, he too had pulled back, the void matter surrounding him like a shell.

No, Harp told Dallion. Dont follow him.

Ive learned my lesson from last time, Dallion replied, waving the weapon about in the air to maintain its vibrations. Nox, Ill need you.

Sorry, cant, the crackling replied.

Hmm? It was rare for Nox to refuse to aid in combat. Usually, the puma enjoyed sharpening its claws. The few times it had refused were against weaker enemies, when it was considered a waste of time. Right now, this wasnt the case. Why?

Its scorching out there.

It took a few moments, but Dallion saw this wasnt a phrase. The void pellets that had buried themselves into the armadil shield were evaporating, leaving thin layers of smoke. Further away, the Star was also surrounded by a cloud of black vapors, almost clinging to him like fine, wet mist.

Stay safe, Dallion said. He was going to handle the fight with Lux alone.

COMBAT INITIATED

What the heck? Dallion stared at the purple rectangle that had appeared. The fight had started a while ago. Come to think of it, there hadnt been a rectangle when it did.

The surroundings changed again. Spires emerged from the ground and sky, flying in the directions of both Dallion and the Star. Instinctively, Dallion split into instances, avoiding them. Meanwhile, the Star had the void matter thicken in the areas of impact, effectively shielding him from the attack.

Sorry, kid, but I just cant trust either of you, the aetherbirds voice echoed throughout the air. No hard feelings, though. Youll just end up outside. Ill even give you the feathers, as I promised.

So, ultimately, it had turned out into a free-way fight. The difference was that Aether had waited until both sides were at a disadvantage until joining it. Quite sneaky. It wasnt the first time he had delayed an event until long after it had occurred the advantages of being the Purple Moons familiar.

Any advice on the magic front, Nil? Dallion asked, using three instances to keep an eye out for further surprise attacks.

Beware of illusions, the old echo said. Thats your greatest weakness, so theyll use that against you.

Both of them?

In a three-way fight, everyone is the greatest threat.

Chapter 618: Three-Way Battle

Red and green markers appeared all of a sudden, providing Dallion options to better his fight. The issue was that they appeared minutes after they were needed still displaying solutions to situations long past. The first few times they had confused Dallion to the point that hed almost lost all his instances to magic attacks.

Which one do I go for? Dallion asked, zig-zagging through the air. Four aetherbirds were in the air, casting spells at tremendous speed. For the moment, they were focusing on the Star, though Dallion would also be targeted.

It doesnt matter! Nil shouted. None of them are real!

That much was a given. The real aetherbird remained the realm itself, although the way magic went it was also possible that every echo was simultaneously the real one.

Concentrating, Dallion combined a spark with a line attack. The action was tiring, though not as exhausting as in the past. A slightly shimmering line spread towards the horizon, ready to sever everything in his past. Dallion had aimed it to hit three of the aetherbirds and the Star. To little surprise, it only managed to strike one of the echoes and mostly due to its overconfidence.

Apparently, spark attacks were potent even against a being made of magic, though normal attacks could also have some effect.

No rectangle appeared. Most likely it would do so in another minute, when everyone had forgotten about it. That was one of the things that annoyed Dallion about magic: the rules went counter to everything he had learned so far. To make matters worse, having an entity that could create spell patterns with its feathers made it next to impossible to break a spell cast.

Fighting Katka was so much easier, Dallion thought as he darted toward the Star. The plan was simple: while he had to defend himself from the aetherbird, defeating the Star was a must. With luck, the spark attacks would inflict some permanent status crippling Arthurows in the future.

Concentrating, Dallion tried to use his perception trait to find weak spots on his enemy. As expected, no markers appeared. That wasn't too much of an issue, as a hunter, Dallion was used to fighting without markers.

Spark! he shouted, striking at the back of the Star.

The void matter quickly thickened to protect Arthurows, but that was part of Dallion's plan. He had seen how a spark infused harpsisword could cut through the material and it did.

MINOR STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 10%

A scream filled the air, but it wasn't Arthurows. There was no mistaking the shriek for anything human.

He brought in an army, Dallion thought. The void matter wasn't just the brainless blobs kidding in the buildings of the fallen south. They were actual creatures and one had just been killed.

Back! Dallion ordered, fearing a response.

The moment he did, a new series of spikes emerged from the Star's back. The difference was that this time they didn't remain attached to it. Similar to Aethers attack, though on a far lesser scale, they burst in all directions.

Watch it! The armadil shield extended, forming a cocoon around Dallion. Three loud thumps indicated that he had been hit. The tip of a spike appearing within the cocoon indicated that it was serious.

MAJOR WOUND

VIHROGON's health has been reduced by 50%

Shield! Dallion shouted.

I'm fine, Vihrogon replied. The pain soaking his voice made it clear he was lying. If it wasn't for Lux's healing effects, he would have been dead by now. Thankfully, there was a sliver of health keeping him from breaking apart.

Dallion unsummoned him, splitting into instances. The black spikes had changed form, turning into grotesque flying creatures. Even in this state, Dallion could tell that they were chainlings. There had to be over fifty of them, corrupting the environment like ink on a page of paper. Black smoke came out of all of them, as Aethers realm slowly burned their nature away. No doubt they were in considerable pain, but not enough to keep them from fighting.

Spark! Dallion shouted, doing another three-sixty like attack.

The line cut through several chainlings, destroying them on the spot, along with a new echo of the aether bird that just happened to appear at the wrong place. The aether creature glared at Dallion, then went on to attack a nearby chainling. After a certain amount of time, it was going to disappear,

surrendering to the effects of its destruction, but until then it intended to do as much damage to the Stars army as possible.

Shield, how are you? Dallion asked.

Alive. Dont worry about me,

the guardian replied from within Dallions realm. *Focus on the fight.*

Two chainlings merged together, claws and tentacles shooting out of them as they attempted to trap Dallion like an iron maiden. Combining spark with a multi-attack, Dallion drilled them full of holes.

AGGRAVATED STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 100%

Dozens of purple rectangles stacked up quickly chipping away at their health. In a matter of seconds, what was left of the entity dissolved completely in the air.

Good show! Nil congratulated Dallion.

Normally, Dallion would take the compliment in stride. The ease with which he dispatched chainlings, though, alarmed him. Even after reaching the level he had, he shouldnt be able to kill them off this easily. The creatures were barely stronger than cracklings. There were item guardians that had given him a harder time.

The item, he thought.

That had to be it. The moment hed used it, he had reduced Aether and everything else Dallion was in contact with, to level seventy. Apparently, the Stars army was no exception. Yet, that posed a serious concern: since there was no way for the Star to have been in the aetherbirds realm, there was only one other place he could have come from

Nil, can a realm be invaded without its owner knowing? Dallion asked, while engaging in another chainling. This one had taken a smarter approach, using tentacles to fight him at a distance.

Some have claimed so, but not really, no, the old echo replied. If nothing else, youd be told that your realm was invaded. Its possible to see the rectangle when its too late, but

What about hiding in it?

Dallion moved left, and right at small bursts, slicing up the tentacles striking at him. No matter how much of them he cut off, they always seemed to regrow.

Thats a different matter entirely. While people have a difficult time, there are entities that have successfully hidden in other realms. The icicorn within Diroh is a perfect example. However, even that presents a serious difficulty. One would have to be considerably adept at

Splitting into three instances, Dallion flew forward. Using acrobatics, he made his way forward, avoiding the tentacle attacks, and thrust his sword in the center of the black shape. The harpsiblade vibrated, breaking the effect of the light like cracks along the creatures surface, causing it to disintegrate.

TERMINAL STRIKE

Dealt damage is increased by 1000%

Id forgotten what its like to fight here, Dallion said. There was something inherently satisfying seeing the results of each strike.

The euphoria didnt last long as a new series of spires emerged from the ground, one of which missed him by a hair. The aetherbird wasnt slacking either. At this point, everyone was going all out.

Dallion had no way of knowing the state of his opponentsthe Star seemed to be doing pretty well, shooting phoenix echoes with his shotgun, and Aether seemed entirely unphased. Sadly, stress and fatigue had started piling up. Masked beneath the pain of his shoulder, he was starting to feel the usual headaches which occurred when he overused mental abilities. Furthermore, his arms were getting slightly numb.

Spinning in the air, Dallion twisted his body, performing a point attack with a kick. The result shocked his body, sending a brief burst of pain through his leg.

Good, Dallion thought to himself. That gave him a few more point attacks if needed. The bad news was that his legs still werent fully used to the pressure, so he wasnt supposed to overdo it.

Youre picking the wrong side, Arthurows shouted. Youve seen the south. The phoenix was the one who caused all this devastation. If you dont help me, hell do it again. It might not be today, but hes set his sights on the empire. In a few years, or a decade at most, itll be gone, just like the south had.

That lie was poorly timed. Dallion had seen first hand snippets of the events that occurred in the past. As any good lie, it also had enough elements of truth to it. There was no denying that the Star had been pushy back then, but the Moons reaction was extreme to put it lightly. Reducing an advanced society to utter savagery for the actions of some was on the harsh side. Also, Dallion hadnt seen what had occurred the second time. The devastation there seemed even worse. If the fabled city had been erased of existence, the Moons took special care to make sure that the people remained alive. Judging by the craters, the second time things were far more severe. Could it be that the phoenix had caused that? As the embodiment of magic, it was within its power. It was curious how the aetherbirds perch had remained more or less intact after two cataclysms at the very least. Clearly, Aether had the power to save anything he had strong feelings for.

Im the only one providing a counterbalance, The Star went on, while three echoes of the aetherbird composed an exceedingly large and intricate pattern of symbols in the air. Without me, hell go rampant throughout the world. Only the Moons will have the power to stop him, and the Moons dont care. For them all, this is just a chess game. Aether is nothing more than the family cat that likes jumping on the board and knocking off the pieces it doesnt like. One good purr and the Moons will forgive him and set up a new game. Its okay for them, but not for the pieces.

So, we are the pieces? Dallion asked.

You know that already.

The pattern was complete, releasing a mega spell of lightning straight at the Star. Dallion had only seen a handful of spells, so he had no basis for comparison. Seeing this made him freeze up as a statue, as if he'd looked in the eyes of a gorgon. In a flash, every part of him had turned to stone, clothes and weapons included. It was only thanks to Lux's flames that he remained in the air. The effects elsewhere were a lot more terrifying. A giant crater had emerged in the realm just beneath where the Star was, ever-present, even with the rest of the environment shifting. As for Arthurows, the shield of void matter that had expanded to protect him had turned to black clay, quickly crumbling away.

The phoenix caused this? Dallion thought. The crater was similar to those in the south, but also to the one in the Glass Mounts. Could it be that for once in his life Arthurows had told the truth? What if everything he had done was merely to stop a far greater catastrophe? Nerosal being swallowed up by the wilderness would be devastating, but how would it compare to what Dallion had seen happen just now?

My plan was never to challenge the Moons, the Star said, throwing a spear of void matter at the nearest aetherbird echo. It was to stop him! That's why I needed the zoology skill gem! It was only meant to attempt to reason with him without relying on anyone else.

You tried to destroy Nerosal, Dallion thought.

No, the Star replied. My plan never was to destroy it. I wanted to shield it. Only the void can stop Aethers attacks. If you don't believe me, ask yourself this. How come spark attacks work on him just as well as they work on me? Aren't they something granted to you by the Moons?

Chapter 619: Pain Inflictor

PETRIFICATION EFFECT REDUCED BY 25%

PETRIFICATION NO LONGER IN EFFECT

A purple rectangle popped up, allowing Dallion to move again. It was fortunate that Lux was still able to negate the effect. At least Dallion had a fighting chance now. Or did he? Seeing a mega spell in action was a terrifying event. More and more, it was looking like the dwarfs prophecy could be true. If Aether could cause this much damage even with the level of restriction placed on him, what was he capable of without them? As unbelievable as it was, the Star hadn't exaggerated the danger.

Several more aetherbird echoes appeared. What was left of the chainlings in the realm quickly flew in their direction, determined to prevent them from casting another massive spell. Even Dallion did another spark infused line attack, holding the harpsisword with both arms.

What do you suggest? He asked in his realm.

Neither Nil nor Harp said a word.

Harp? Dallion asked.

Were not allowed to make this decision for you, the old echo said. Restrictions.

Of course there would be, Dallion wasn't sure whether he should laugh. If there ever was one vital decision he had to make, this was it. If he made the wrong move, a destructive power would be unleashed in the world. Both the Star and Aether were destructive in their own different ways. Either choice was bad, but the question was which was the lesser of both evils. The logical response was not to allow either of them out, but that was beyond his capabilities. It was difficult enough to fend against either; even after the help from the general's artifact, Dallion remained the weakest link in the situation.

Why do you think the aetherbird would destroy the world? Dallion asked, giving in to his doubts.

Just part, the Star replied, shielding himself from a torrent of feathers raining over him. That's what he does when he gets bored or annoyed. It's his nature. He does it in every era.

He's not done it so far.

Only because he was stopped. The hunters a decade ago managed to capture him. Why do you think the Academy would make a deal with me? That was the only option.

A sphere of blackness emerged around the Star, expanding outwards. One of the aetherbird echoes failed to fly away fast enough, ending up stuck on its surface. The blackness seeped into it like tar, swallowing it whole.

Meanwhile, Dallion flew in the direction of another echo. The creature was busy drawing spell symbols in the air and didn't even react to him. Possibly, Aether had planned this upon seeing Dallion get petrified.

Spark. Dallion thrust his word forward.

The echo ceased casting its spell. The glowing lines and symbols fizzled out in an instant. That was good, although it also allowed the aetherbird to evade the attack and fly off. Not willing to let things end there, Dallion followed. Targeting the creature's weak spot, Dallion threw the harpsisword at it. The aetherbird swerved to the side. The weapon, however, followed, striking it right between the wings.

TERMINAL HIT

Damage dealt has been increased by 1000%

The echo disappeared in a cloud of purple particles. Immediately, Dallion unsummoned and re-summoned his harpsisword. Killing off an echo gave him some time, but it did little more. The fight was still tilted against him.

How did they capture him? Dallion flew in the direction of the Star.

I can't tell you, Arthurows replied. It's not just the restriction, I really don't know. The hunter was supposed to use the device the Academy gave him, but he didn't. He managed to keep it hidden from me and everyone else for a decade, though not for long. Aether managed to escape.

You mean the phoenix hunt announcement was real?

Things sometimes are. Shocking, right?

While that didnt provide any practical help, it did put some things into perspective. It explained why the Star had allowed the creation of the plague. The goal hadnt been creating chaos by killing off awakenedthat was just a bonus. The real purpose was to keep Aether in check. Although Dallion wasnt sure living in such a world was much better than living in no world. Maybe for the un-awakened it was going to be, but even they would be driven centuries back. Those in the cities were definitely going to face difficulties surviving. Even the villages wouldnt prosper, and if they did, they were going to be taken over by the Star cultsthe only remaining power.

How do we capture it? Dallion finally asked. As much as he disliked it, the choice had been made. Defeat the guardian?

That would be too simple. Another black sphere formed around them. Completely opaque, it sealed them off from the purple surroundings. Only Dallions blue flames provided light. Aethers echoes are also him. Killing them off wont defeat him, but neither would killing the world either.

We must destroy everything at the same time?

Cure, but wrong. Well, almost wrong. We arent mages.

Cant you use your powers to make a bomb or something?

You level capped me! Im lucky to make a hand grenade.

What then?

There was a moment of silence. Purple cracks appeared in a section of the black sphere, looking like tears in a black sky.

You have to find his core. Attack his core and all of Aether will merge into one entity. Then I can deal with him.

Betrayal practically oozed from the suggestion. Dallion could see that clearly. Every fiber in his being screamed this was a terrible plan for everyone else but the Star. The sad part was that it did seem as the only alternative. The Academy must have thought the same, or at least part of the Academy. Someone had probably done a cost-benefit analysis and come to this conclusion. Now, Dallion was going to do the same.

How do I find the core?

The same way you do in a normal item. Magic is one big exception, but even it followed the basic frame of things.

The core had to be the realms awakening room. That made sense, just as it was inevitable that the aetherbird would try to stop him. In order for this to work. Dallion would have to trust that the Star would be capable, and willing, to provide a distraction while he set off to find the room. Hopefully, that would be enough to keep Aether from going at Dallion at full strength.

Anything else?

Dont get distracted. The closer you get to the goal, the more temptations youll be offered.

So, hes just like you, Dallion thought.

All of them will be real and some of them will seem like a good deal, but you must keep your eyes on the goal.

How will I know which one is the goal, exactly?

It'll be the only thing not offered for free.

The black sphere surrounding them shattered. Dallion split into instances, moving away from the Star as quickly as possible. Good thing too, for a series of purple spears thrust through Arthurows, turning him into a pincushion. This had to have done significant damage. There was a considerable chance it would be enough to cast him out of the aetherbirds realm.

Lux, boost! Dallion didnt want to find out. His body was propelled forward as fast as the firebird could take him. A few moments later, he was somewhere completely different. Knowing how harsh such flying was on Dallions body, Lux came to a slow stop. There was no sign of the crater or the mountainthe only permanent landmarks of the realm.

Find the skill chamber, Dallion thought. No pressure, eh?

The fact that no aetherbird echoes had appeared suggested that the Star was still alive and kicking. That Gave Dallion some time. Given the size and changing nature of this place, it didnt make things easier.

Dallion looked around. The landscape seemed to shift non-stop, going through every possible time hed seen. It was a safe bet that the heart of the realm wouldnt be located on the surface. Taking cloud creatures as a reference, it was probably somewhere below. Dallion still had his thread splitter, though entering solid matter was a lot different from entering a cloud. Clouds didnt have the ability to spontaneously harden, crushing anyone within. Even if the aetherbird couldnt control its shifts, sooner or later it was going to happen, causing Dallion to suffer the same fate.

Well, Eury, this is another fine mess I got myself into.

If she were here right now, shed probably have a few choice words to say. After that, she was going to help him with all her might. The gorgon knew how the game was played far better than she let on. The only reason she hadnt become a noble was her emotional attachments to peoplesomething she had done her best to keep hidden by putting on various facades: the flirty armorer, the practical hunter, the efficient mercenary. It wasnt a stretch to say that she had set her sights on the fifth gate to put herself in a position to protect Dallion.

In turn, Dallion intended to do the same. He couldnt be certain that his actions would save the world, but he didnt want to take the chance that his lack of action would bring to its destruction.

Harp, Ill need your help on this one, he whispered, raising the weapon above his head. Can you do it?

You know I have no choice, the nymph replied. Elements of pride and sadness resonated in the words.

I know. Spark! Using every ounce of strength left, Dallion performed a line attack.

The land beneath him split apart. Both sides of it turned into a sea, but that didnt cause the tear to vanish.

CRITICAL STRIKE

Dealt Damage has increased by 200%

PERMANENT EFFECT COMBAT SCAR

AETHERs body has been permanently covered with combat scars. The scars will remain until the status is removed.

Would you look at that? Dallion smiled. With Harps help, he had managed to inflict his first permanent damage. Of course, the effects were a lot less harsh than the ones he himself had received. Being magic came with its benefits. Dallion wouldnt be surprised if the effect wasnt at all permanent. Regardless, it had provided him with the opportunity he needed.

Lux, he thought.

The firebird propelled him down into the crack of the realm. The terrain kept changing on either side. Shifting water to boiling magma. All that was to scare Dallion. As long as he wasn't in contact with it, it didnt matter what it was.

PAIN INFLICTOR

(+2 Body)

Inflicting permanent effects look good on other people. Just dont make it a habit for everyones sake.

Heh. Dallion laughed. Even the achievements came with a delay. The aetherbird had no intention of making things easy, although it seemed in this case there wasnt anything it could do.

Closing his eyes for a moment, Dallion combined his zoology and scholar skills. If the entire realm was a mix of one big structure and a living being, the basic organs had to correspond to certain parts. Normally, it would be difficult to pinpoint the organ of a being that shifted like water, but Dallion had one point of referencethe mountain. Given the significance of it in real life, there was only one thing it could be: the highest point of its bodythe head. It was a guess, of course, but a good one.

About ten seconds later, Dallions suspicions were confirmed. As he kept on flying down in the general direction of the atherbirds heart, weapons started appearing on both sides of the wall, trapped in the purple terrain like fossils. The bribes had begun. Some of the weapons were more exotic than Dallion could possibly imagine. All he had to do was reach out and grab one of them, and the blueprint would likely become his. Of course, doing so would also allow the aetherbird to affect him, possibly leading to his ejection out of the realm.

Good start, Dallion said. Maybe offer something better?

Instantly, the weapons vanished.

Chapter 620: Star or Phoenix

An otherworlder that helps the Star pull whole cities into the wildernessthat was the sign that would mark the end of the world yet again. At least according to the nymph prophecy. The dwarf was adamant that it would happen, and so had isolated himself in a place he thought would withstand the

inevitable cataclysm. Dallion had taken the whole thing quite badly at the time. Back then, he feared that the poison plague would cause the end of the world, and that he had caused it. He had even tried making Harp tell him more about the prophecy, but the nymph had remained evasive in the best of cases.

Things made a lot more sense now. The prophecy wasn't a true prophecy even high level awakened and mages didn't have such powers. If anyone had to guess, it probably was a series of instructions about what not to do in order not to end up like the previous races. A pity that the first rule wasn't to stay away from the Star. Or maybe the Star had been the solution? Having as little knowledge as he did, Dallion had no way of telling which was the cause of which. It was just as possible that the Star corrupted everything in order to shield the world from the aetherbird.

Ready for another one, Harp? Dallion asked.

Both his arms were shaking. That meant that he had strength for three or four serious spark attacks at most.

The split in Aethers realm ended, but Dallion didn't set foot on the bottom of it. Instead, he continued forward along it in the direction of the heart. Taking a deep breath, he performed a spark infused point attack. The strike ripped through the ever changing surface on the side, drilling a tunnel deeper in.

Dallion expected the whole realm to tremble, but it didn't, as if the aetherbird didn't even feel the pain. What was really bothersome was the lack of any real obstacles. Even with the Aethers focus on the Star, he more than had the power to prevent Dallion's progress. A few echoes should have appeared at the very least.

Why are you letting me continue? Dallion wondered, as Lux took him along the tunnel. Instinct made Dallion split into three instances, ready to react should the unexpected happen. Nothing of the sort did.

Chisels appeared all over the tunnel, including the floor. This had to be the second offer the aetherbird was giving him. Quite perceptive it was the only skill, other than spellcraft, that Dallion didn't have.

You can always offer me spellcraft, Dallion said loudly.

Within seconds, the chisels disappeared.

I guess you don't handle rejection well. Being a Moons familiar, it was all but natural.

Based on what Dallion knew about firebird anatomy, the heart was its left eye, while the right was the brain. In normal circumstances, those would be easy to get, but there were exceptions. When a firebird turned into a ball of flames, as they usually did in battle, they shifted the location of their eyes deep within them. One floated to the central part of the body and the other to the base of the neck. Provided that the aetherbird shared a lot of similarities with a common firebird, language included, it was safe to assume this was the case here as well.

If Dallion's calculations were right, his target was at the end of the tunnel. He definitely hoped that was the case.

You're playing with fire, an echo emerged ten feet from Dallion.

It was obvious that something was up. From what Dallion had seen, Aether wasn't one to waste time with warnings or idle conversation. If he had wanted to attack, he would have done so right away. For whatever reason, he chose not to, or something was preventing him.

Everything you've seen so far or a fight.

Focusing, Dallion tried to find any emotion within the echo or the surrounding tunnel. There was none. It was different from the void or the blocker items he could feel just enough to know that there was something, even if it was nondescript, like white noise.

You said you can't trust me, Dallion said.

You're a smart kid. The offer comes with a quick ejection from my realm. A pity too. You played your cards well. A bit sloppy bringing the Star in here, though that could end up being a net positive. So, what will it be?

Not afraid I'll use music on you?

If you thought it'd work, you'd be using it. Same as me. If I could fight you straight off, I wouldn't be offering bribes.

Can't you side with me? Let's

Get rid of the Star? And then what? Will you leave my realm just like that? If yes, then why don't you leave now? I'll take care of the Star once it's the two of us.

It was a very good question. As much as Dallion wanted to fool himself that he would leave once the Star was gone, he knew he wouldn't. Even if he didn't fear the aetherbird would bring to another end of the world, he'd still have tried to go through with it. He was only human, and the temptation was just too great.

I thought so. The aetherbird flapped its wings.

Before Dallion could answer, the creature vanished in an outline of purple flames. A split second later, so did the tunnel itself. The realm disappeared, along with the purple sky surrounding it. Only Dallion remained, alone in an endless blackness, surrounded by Lux blue flames.

Enduring the ever-increasing headache, he split into six instances, then moved about so as to look in every direction.

At first, there was nothing to be seen. It was as if he had been cast into an abyss. Soon enough, though, he spotted the faintest of dots in the distance. Like a single purple firefly, the dot appeared, then disappeared. The very next moment a spider web of lightning fell upon Dallion. Four of his instances were instantly reduced to particles. The remaining two managed to evade the lethal net, only just.

Lux! Dallion ordered, splitting again. This was it the real fight had begun.

Tapping the blade of his harpsword against his shoe, Dallion thrust directly at the purple dot. The speed was on the verge of what could be tolerated. Within a fraction of a second, he arrived next to the aetherbird, only to see it effectively teleport several miles away once more. Strictly speaking, it wasn't teleportation. Dallion had acquired enough knowledge to be aware of the aether lines that didn't follow the standard concepts of space and distance. That didn't make it any better.

Keep at him, Lux! Dallion shouted. Nox, can you come out now?

Yes, the puma purred. But I cant fly.

Ill make sure you dont have to.

Flashes of blue and purple filled the darkness as Aether and Dallion moved from place to place. Every ten seconds or so, theyd remain in the vicinity of one another for long enough to exchange a few attacks. The aetherbird would take the opportunity to cast a spell, while Dallion would do his best to interrupt the process while also attacking with a vibrating hapsisword.

Purple rectangles would stack up, displaying Dallions loss of health and the subsequent restoration.

It took two strikes for Dallion to find that common vibration attacks were useless. The blade would simply pass through, causing no damage whatsoever. Only spark attacks had an effect, and they were getting more and more difficult to maintain.

Nil, how can I see the health of a magical creature?

This one? No idea.

How about remaining magic?

The magic trait isnt a measurement of health, dear boy. It merely indicates possible spell strength. The rest is up to stamina.

While intriguing, the answer wasnt particularly helpful. Quite the opposite. In order for the aetherbird to grow tired of casting spells, Dallion had to let it cast as many as possible. So far, Dallion had only witnessed one mega spell. Given that the Star was nowhere to be seen, potentially a few more had been used. Based on the damage such spells caused, one could say they were roughly equivalent to a point attack combined with a spark. That suggested that if the aetherbird was as strong as Dallion, it had stamina for close to a dozen more.

Circles of patterns formed round the aetherbird, its wings moving so fast that Dallion could barely see the afterimage. This was markedly different from the start of the battle. Aether had to have used magic to increase his reaction trait.

Thats a good thing, Nil said.

How? Dallion attempted another point attack, but all he managed was to scorch off the tip of the aethbirds left wing.

Magic is the art of exceptions, but it cannot create. It just transforms one thing into another. If the aetherbird has tripled its reaction trait, the difference had to be taken from all the rest, it might well be a one hit target.

I doubt it. Hes not stupid.

Who said stupid? Its all a matter of strategy. Why increase your defense if your opponent can never hit you?

Memories of Dallions childhood flashed back. When playing video games back on Earth, there had been a constant argument, which was better: someone strong who could flatten enemies with one blow, or someone fast who could evade any attack. In a way, this was a reenactment of that mental argument. If Nil was right, Dallion was now the strong one. The difference was that he only had two, maybe three, strikes left.

The magic circle burst, dispersing fragments of light all around Dallion. Like a kaleidoscope they went through a quick series of merging and breaking apart, then darted at him. Three of Dallions instances were riddled with holes, suffering almost immediate death. The remaining three received large amounts of damage, over half a dozen purple rectangles stacking up in front of each.

Faced with a bad series of choices, Dallion chose the instance that had him lose sixty present health, then split again. Lux immediately boosted him away from the area. However, the particles followed. Moments later, a new set cut through his instances with similar effects. Thankfully, by then Dallions health had restored.

Using Star magic to heal, Aether said with a hint of disgust. Quite a nasty cheat.

Isnt magic a cheat? Dallion asked, doing another point attack in the direction of the aetherbird. The distance between the two was only a hundred feet, but once again, Aether evaded the blow. On cue, the glowing fragments faded away.

Dallions arms were almost completely numb now. They had stopped the attack, but brought Dallion to his last one.

Magic is versatility. Star powers are the corruption of principles. People never change. They look at the advantages without thinking of the consequences. Youve enjoyed the healing, but never considered where it comes from.

I know where it comes from.

So, you know each time your firebird heals you, it harms itself? Aether asked. Just like you know that in order to heal your crackling must hurt others?

Dallion didnt answer. He wasnt aware of either of those facts. He was generally aware that cracklings grew as the cracks in objects and domains did, but hed never think it was so literal. So, each time Nox had harmed or destroyed an object he had healed? No wonder he was always healthy.

Lux, is that true? Dallion asked.

Yep, its true, boss!

Why didnt you tell me?! More important, why hadnt Dallion seen any rectangles? They usually appeared when any of his familiars got wounded.

Its all fine, boss. The firebird chirped happily. Almost nothing can hurt me. And I get better after some rest.

Damnit!

All the times Dallion had asked Lux to heal him or someone else, hed taken it for granted, treating him as an infinite healing potion. This was not just a matter of getting tired. The familiar sacrificed his own health for Dallion.

You get it now, dont you? Aether began casting a new spell. Judging by the number of patterns, it was going to be a big one. Now you see why Star powers have no place in the world.